

Neither has the Atlantic world had much impact on U.S. history. Most work on early national and antebellum American history is resolutely focused on the history of America as a nation-state. As Joyce Chaplin argues, the best studies by mid-career historians of the Revolutionary period now tend to be about the early republic rather than the Revolution and are self-consciously indifferent to Atlantic perspectives. The field of the early republic, she suggests, exerts a gravitational pull on colonial American and Atlantic scholarship. Atlantic history not only fades the further we go beyond 1789 but comprises an ever-diminishing portion of the avalanche of scholarship produced by American historians of all time periods. Even the history of the American Revolution is not well integrated into the Atlantic world. Differing emphases of interpretation and approach now make colonial and Revolutionary American history almost two separate entities.

In sum, the response to Armitage's boast that "we are all Atlanticists now" must be "no, we are not." Some of us are Atlanticists, but many more historians, to whom Atlantic historians ought to feel a link, have no interest in the intellectual agenda set out by Atlantic historians. The relative lack of interest shown in Atlantic history by other historians should dampen our enthusiasm for making a whole-scale conversion to the delights of Atlantic history.

So, proceed with caution before jumping on the Atlantic-history bandwagon. It promises much as a field, but questions hover over whether it can deliver on that promise. For my generation of historians, the Atlantic-history movement has been a positive good, allowing us to travel to interesting places, meet like-minded people, and do work that is innovative and that does not replicate narrowly the work done by our social-history predecessors. The danger for the next generation of historians is what happens when the bar is raised, when work in Atlantic history has to be genuinely transatlantic, necessitating an in-depth knowledge of several cultures and several languages. Will early-American historians feel comfortable marooned from their compatriots who do United States history or early modern European history, and will they be happy being located in the institutional ghetto—fabulous as that ghetto may be—that contains Latin American, African, Asian, and world historians? In short, if you are part of the early-Americanist majority that keeps Atlantic history afloat, keep hold of your stocks in Atlantic history, but make sure you diversify sufficiently to avoid being hurt in the crash that follows a heady boom.

Does Equiano Still Matter?

Vincent Carretta

I have been invited to address the question of whether—despite the possibility that he fabricated his personal and African identities—the man best known today as Olaudah Equiano remains a central figure in the reconstruction of Atlantic history and to our understanding of the Atlantic world. Before I do so, let me briefly summarize his life, as he recounts it in his autobiography, and touch on the significant role he has played in historical and literary studies.

According to *The Interesting Narrative of the Life of Olaudah Equiano, or Gustavus Vassa, the African. Written by Himself* (London, 1789), Equiano was born in 1745 in what is now southeastern Nigeria. There, he says, he was enslaved at the age of eleven, and sold to English slave traders who took him on the Middle Passage to the West Indies. Within a few days, he tells us, he was taken to Virginia and sold to a local planter. After about a month in Virginia, he was purchased by Michael Henry Pascal, an officer in the British Royal Navy, who brought him to London. Pascal ironically renamed him Gustavus Vassa after the sixteenth-century Swedish monarch who liberated his people from Danish tyranny. During the eighteenth century, slaves were often given ironically inappropriate names of powerful historical figures like Caesar and Pompey to emphasize their subjugation to their masters' wills. With Pascal, Equiano saw military action on both sides of the Atlantic Ocean during the Seven Years' War. In 1762, at the end of the conflict, Pascal shocked Equiano by refusing to free him, selling him instead to the West Indies. Escaping the horrors of slavery in the sugar islands, Equiano managed to save enough money to buy his own freedom in 1766. In Central America he helped purchase slaves and supervised them on a plantation. Equiano set off on voyages of commerce and adventure to North America, the Mediterranean,

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the West Indies, and the North Pole. Equiano was now a man of the Atlantic. A close encounter with death during his Arctic voyage forced him to recognize that he might be doomed to eternal damnation. He resolved his spiritual crisis by embracing Methodism in 1774. Later he became an outspoken opponent of the slave trade, first in his letters to newspapers and then in his autobiography. He married an Englishwoman in 1792, with whom he had two daughters. Thanks largely to profits from his publications, when Equiano died on March 31, 1797, he was probably the wealthiest and certainly the most famous person of African descent in the Atlantic world.

Over the past thirty-five years, historians, literary critics, and the general public have come to recognize the author of *The Interesting Narrative* as one of the most accomplished English-speaking writers of his age and unquestionably the most accomplished author of African descent. Several modern editions are now available of his autobiography. The literary status of *The Interesting Narrative* has been acknowledged by its inclusion in the Penguin Classics series. It is universally accepted as the fundamental text in the genre of the slave narrative. Excerpts from the book appear in every anthology and on any Web site covering American, African American, British, and Caribbean history and literature of the eighteenth century. The most frequently excerpted sections are the early chapters on his life in Africa and his experience on the Middle Passage crossing the Atlantic to America. Indeed it is difficult to think of any historical account of the Middle Passage that does not quote his eyewitness description of its horrors as primary evidence. Interest in Equiano has not been restricted to academia. He has been the subject of television shows, films, comic books, and books written for children. The story of Equiano's life is part of African, African American, Anglo-American, African British, and African Caribbean popular culture. Equiano is also the subject of a biography published in 1998 by James Walvin, an eminent historian of slavery and the slave trade.

Since the early 1970s we have witnessed a renaissance of interest in Equiano's autobiography and its author. During Equiano's own lifetime, *The Interesting Narrative* went through an impressive nine editions. Most books published during the eighteenth century never saw a second edition. A few more editions of his book appeared, in altered and often abridged form, during the twenty years after his death in 1797. Thereafter, he was briefly cited and sometimes quoted by British and American opponents of slavery throughout the first half of the nineteenth century. He was still well enough known publicly that he was identified in 1857 as "Gustavus Vassa the African" on the newly discovered gravestone of his only child who survived to

adulthood. But after 1857 Equiano and his *Interesting Narrative* seem to have been almost completely forgotten on both sides of the Atlantic for more than a century. A notable exception was W. E. B. Du Bois, who in 1913 recognized Equiano's autobiography as "the beginning of that long series of personal appeals of which Booker T. Washington's *Up from Slavery* is the latest."¹ The declining interest in the author and his book is probably explained by the shift in emphasis from the abolition of the British-dominated transatlantic slave trade to the abolition of slavery, particularly in the United States, following the outlawing of the transatlantic trade in 1807.

The twentieth-century recovery of the man and his work began with the publication in 1969 by Paul Edwards of a facsimile edition of *The Interesting Narrative*. I have been teaching and researching Equiano since the early 1990s. Although I had heard of Equiano before then, I had never seen a copy of his work, and from what I had read about it, I assumed that it was a text more appropriate for American literature courses than for the British courses I was teaching at the time. Placing Equiano in the tradition of American autobiographical writing exemplified by Benjamin Franklin went unchallenged. They were both seen as self-made men who raised themselves by their own exertions from obscurity and poverty. No one thought to point out that since the publication in London of Equiano's autobiography preceded by decades that of Franklin's in the United States, rather than considering Equiano an African American Franklin, we would more accurately call Franklin an Anglo-American Equiano.

Preparing to teach *The Interesting Narrative* and later editing the text for Penguin Putnam, I began a series of discoveries that led to my decision to write a biography of its author. Many of those discoveries were ones I never expected, indeed, never wanted to make because they so profoundly challenged my sense of who Olaudah Equiano, or Gustavus Vassa, the African, was. Recent biographical discoveries cast doubt on Equiano's story of his birth and early years. The available evidence suggests that the author of *The Interesting Narrative* may have invented rather than reclaimed an African identity. If so, Equiano's literary achievements have been vastly underestimated. Baptismal and naval records say that he was born in South Carolina around 1747. If they are accurate, he invented his African childhood and his much-quoted account of the Middle Passage on a slave ship.² Other newly found evidence proves that Equiano first came to England years earlier than he says. He was clearly willing to manipulate at least some of the details of his life. Problematic as such evidence may be, any would-be biographer must now take it into account.

Reasonable doubt raised by the recent biographical discoveries inclines me to believe that the accounts of Africa and the Middle Passage in *The Interesting Narrative* were constructed—and carefully so—rather than actually experienced and that the author probably invented an African identity. But we must remember that reasonable doubt is not the same as conviction. We will probably never *know* the truth about the author's birth and upbringing. The burden of proof, however, is now on those who believe that *The Interesting Narrative* is a historically accurate piece of nonfiction. Anyone who still contends that Equiano's account of the early years of his life is authentic is obligated to account for the powerful conflicting evidence. And we must consequently reassess the ways in which we have interpreted and used his autobiography.

Equiano was certainly African by descent. The circumstantial evidence that Equiano was also African American by birth and African British by choice is compelling but not absolutely conclusive. Supporting Equiano's claim of an African birth, Adam Hochschild argues, is "the long and fascinating history of autobiographies that distort or exaggerate the truth But in each of these cases, the lies and inventions pervade the entire book. Seldom is one crucial portion of a memoir totally fabricated and the remainder scrupulously accurate; among autobiographers, as with other writers, both dissemblers and truth-tellers tend to be consistent."³ A writer as skillful and careful as Equiano, however, could have been one of the rare exceptions that Hochschild acknowledges exist. Equiano certainly knew that to do well financially by doing good for the abolitionist cause, he needed to establish and maintain his credibility as an eyewitness to the evils of the transatlantic slave trade and slavery in its various eighteenth-century forms. He also knew what parts of his story could be corroborated by others and, more important, if he was combining fiction with fact, what parts could not easily be contradicted.

Why might Equiano have created an African nativity and disguised an American birth? The timing of the publication of *The Interesting Narrative* was no accident. Mainly through the efforts of the philanthropist Thomas Clarkson, the organized opposition to the African slave trade gathered and published evidence against the infamous practice from 1787 on. But before 1789 the evidence and arguments against the slave trade came from white voices alone. The only published black witnesses were clearly fictitious, found, for example, in the poems of Hannah More and William Cowper. In *An Essay on the Slavery and Commerce of the Human Species*, Equiano's future subscriber Clarkson acknowledged the desirability of hearing the victim's

point of view. Clarkson dramatized the transatlantic slave trade by placing the trade in "the clearest, and most conspicuous point of view." Employing the virtual reality of fiction to convey factual experience, he imagined himself interviewing a "melancholy African." "We shall," he wrote, "throw a considerable part of our information on this head into the form of a narrative: we shall suppose ourselves, in short, on the continent of Africa, and relate a scene, which, from its agreement with unquestionable facts, might not unreasonably be presumed to have been presented to our view, had we really been there."⁴ Initially, not even black opponents of the trade recognized the rhetorical power an authentic African voice could wield in the struggle. When Equiano's friend, collaborator, and future subscriber Quobna Ottobah Cugoano published *Thoughts and Sentiments on the Evil and Wicked Traffic of the Slavery and Commerce of the Human Species* in London in 1787, he chose not to describe Africa or the Middle Passage in much detail. A member of the Fante people from the area of present-day Ghana who had been kidnapped into slavery around 1770, Cugoano believed that "it would be needless to give a description of all the horrible scenes which we saw, and the base treatment which we met with in this dreadful captive situation, as the similar cases of thousands, which suffer by this infernal traffic, are well known."⁵

Equiano knew that what the antislave trade movement needed most in 1789 to continue its increasing momentum was the rhetorical power an authentic African voice could wield in the struggle. His autobiography corroborated and even explicitly drew upon earlier reports of Africa and the trade by some white observers and challenged those of others. His account of Africa is a combination of printed sources, memory, and imagination. Equiano appreciated that "only something so particular as a single life . . . could capture the multiplicity of . . . lives" in the eighteenth-century Atlantic world.⁶ The abolitionist movement required precisely the kind of account of Africa and the Middle Passage that he, and perhaps only he, could supply. An African, not an African American, voice was what was needed. He gave a voice to the millions of people forcibly taken from Africa and brought to the Americas as slaves. Equiano recognized a way to do very well financially by doing a great deal of good in supplying that much-needed voice.

By forging a part of his personal identity and creating an Igbo national identity *avant la lettre*, Equiano became an effective spokesperson for his fellow diasporan Africans. As the Nobel laureate Nigerian author Chinua Achebe has observed, the consciousness of the Igbo identity that Equiano asserts is a far more recent phenomenon: "In my area, historically, [the Igbo people] did not see themselves as Igbo. They saw themselves as people from

this village or that village. In fact in some places 'Igbo' was a word of abuse; they were the 'other' people, down in the bush. And yet, after the experience of the Biafran War, during a period of two years [1967–70], it became a very powerful consciousness. But it was *real* all the time. They all spoke the same language, called 'Igbo,' even though they were not using that identity in any way. But the moment came when this identity became very very powerful . . . and over a very short period."⁷

Contemporary scholars value Equiano's "unique first-hand account of eighteenth-century Igboland" so highly because so little other direct information about the mid-eighteenth-century Igbo exists.⁸ But this same absence of evidence gave Equiano the opportunity for invention he needed if he was born in South Carolina rather than Africa. Equiano uses his autobiography to practice nation-formation as well as self-creation. He was a pioneer in the forging of an Igbo national identity.

To be sure, an argument has been made that an Igbo national identity was developing during the eighteenth century, but even if such an identity had been established by the time Equiano was writing, it was not the primary identity a native West African would likely have claimed, except possibly to outsiders.⁹ During the eighteenth century the now more familiar national sense of Igbo was the result of the involuntary African diaspora: "A sense of pan-Igbo identity came only when its people left Igboland—an experience first imposed by the slave trade."¹⁰ Whites used the term *Eboe* or *Igbo* in the diasporan sense throughout the eighteenth century. Like the terms *Guinea* and *Koromantyn*, *Eboe* was a geographical and supraethnic concept Europeans created that elided the significant cultural differences among various ethnic groups in West Africa.

Equiano speaks with the voice of an Igbo protonationalist proud of his homeland, no doubt aware that if he could rehabilitate the reputation of the Igbo in particular, he would rehabilitate the reputation of Africans in general. Equiano knew that earlier and contemporaneous commentators disagreed with his positive assessment of the peoples Europeans called Igbos, the slaves least desired by planters in the British colonies.¹¹ As one historian points out, "No Chesapeake planter is known to have expressed a preference for laborers originating in the Bight of Biafra, and indeed Ibo . . . slaves were held in particularly low esteem in much of the Caribbean and in South Carolina."¹² Scholars who overemphasize the few times Equiano uses the term *Eboe* often ignore the way he organizes his account of Africa. He moves from recollections about "Eboe" specifically to comments about Africans in general, and he closes his first chapter with a series of rhetorical questions that force his

readers to draw conclusions about the universal nature of humankind from the evidence he has presented. Despite claiming to describe distinctively Igbo manners, he conflates accounts of various African ethnic groups to construct a kind of pan-African identity, a sort of essential African.

Modern scholars rightly point out that of the surviving brief eighteenth-century descriptions of the kingdom of Benin, Equiano's account of Igboland is the most fully developed. Equiano's description is certainly the most complete eighteenth-century ethnography of "Eboe" we have from a person of African descent and the only one not mediated by a white translator or transcriber. But critics and scholars have increasingly come to recognize that his account's apparent uniqueness does not guarantee its authenticity.¹³ All that we know of Olaudah Equiano's existence in Africa comes from his own account, and that account was clearly intended to be part of the dialogue about the African slave trade. His representation of Igboland challenged competing images of a land of savagery, idolatry, cannibalism, indolence, and social disorder. If Equiano forged both his personal and national African identities, he risked being exposed as an imposter, thus discrediting the abolitionist cause, but the financial and rhetorical success of his book demonstrated that it was a risk well worth taking.

Every autobiography is an act of re-creation, and autobiographers are not under oath when they are reconstructing their lives. Furthermore, an autobiography is an act of rhetoric. That is, any autobiography is designed to influence the reader's impression of its author and often, as in the case of *The Interesting Narrative*, to affect the reader's beliefs or actions as well. The most constant quality of Equiano's *self* was his ability to transform himself, to redefine and refashion his identity in response to changing circumstances.

A manumitted (freed) slave faced a greater opportunity for redefinition than any other autobiographer. Manumission necessitated redefinition. The profoundest possible transformation was the one any slave underwent when freed, moving from the legal status of property to that of person, from commodity to human being. Former slaves were also immediately compelled to redefine themselves by choosing a name. Choosing not to choose was not an option. With freedom came the obligation to forge a new identity, whether by creating one out of the personal qualities and opportunities at hand or by counterfeiting one. Equiano may have done both. In one sense, the world lay all before the former slave, who as property had been a person without a country or a legal personal identity. Equiano's restlessness and apparent wanderlust once he was free may have been the result of his quest for an identity and a place in the world.

In the sense of raising himself from poverty and obscurity, Equiano was a more self-made man than Franklin, and he was as successful during his lifetime as Franklin in marketing that image of himself. Through a combination of talent, opportunity, and determination, Equiano became the first successful professional black writer. Franklin rose from poverty to prosperity; Equiano rose from being property in the eyes of the law to being the wealthiest person of African descent in Britain. Like Franklin, Equiano offered his own life as a model for others to follow. Equiano's personal conversions and transformations from enslaved to free, pagan to Christian, and proslavery to abolitionist, anticipated the changes he hoped to make in his readers, as well as the transformation he called for in the relationship between Britain and Africa. Equiano was an even more profoundly self-made man than Franklin if he invented an identity to suit the times.

Whether or not Equiano engaged in self-invention, attempts to pin him down to simply either an African, an American, or a British identity are doomed to failure. Once he was free, Equiano judged parts of North America reasonably nice places to visit, but he never revealed any interest in voluntarily living there. By Equiano's account, the amount of time he spent in North America during his life could be measured in months, not years. Whether he spent a few months, as he claims, or several years, as other evidence suggests, living in mainland North America, he spent far more time at sea. He spent at least ten years on the Atlantic Ocean and Mediterranean Sea during periods of war and peace between 1754 and 1785. The places he considered as a permanent home were Britain, Turkey, and Africa. Ultimately he chose Britain, in part because Africa was denied him, despite his several attempts to get there.

As we all do, Equiano chose from the various subject positions available to him the one or ones most appropriate for the particular audience or audiences he was addressing. Sometimes he spoke or wrote primarily as a native of Africa, sometimes as a diasporan African, sometimes as an African Briton, sometimes as a Briton, sometimes as a Christian, and at other times as more than one of the above. Just as we are at the same time parents to our children and children to our parents, our subject position can change while we remain the same. Each of us has overlapping identities, one or more of which dominates in different contexts. Skilled rhetoricians know how to shift their positions, that is, how to emphasize different aspects of their identity to best influence and affect their readers or listeners. The private and public letters, book reviews, and petitions Equiano wrote and published in 1787 and 1788 display a masterful rhetorician honing his skills.

On December 15, 1787, using just the name Gustavus Vassa, Equiano cosigned a letter entitled "The Address of Thanks of the Sons of Africa to the Honourable Granville Sharp, Esq." Only Cugoano and one other cosigner of the letter they sent to the abolitionist Sharp identified themselves with both African and slave names. These self-styled "Sons of Africa" refer to themselves as "we, who are a part, or descendants, of the much-wronged people of Africa" (329, 328).¹⁴ Clearly, Equiano and his colleagues believed that one was as much a "Son of Africa" by descent as by birth. At the end of the eighteenth century, one could be African without ever having set foot in Africa. By the time Equiano published his autobiography, a diasporan African identity was as authentic as a native one.

In writing his autobiography, Equiano transformed a social defect into a rhetorical virtue. Having been dislocated socially and geographically by slavery, he assumed the identity of a "citizen of the world," a cosmopolitan status normally reserved for gentlemen possessing enough wealth and leisure to be able to cultivate tastes that transcended narrow national interests and prejudices (337). Denied a nation, he claimed the world. But if *The Interesting Narrative* is indeed partly historical fiction, what value does it retain for historians?

As a self-proclaimed "citizen of the world," Equiano epitomized what Ira Berlin has called an "Atlantic creole":

Along the periphery of the Atlantic—first in Africa, then in Europe, and finally in the Americas—[Anglophone-African] society was a product of the momentous meeting of Africans and Europeans and of their equally fateful encounter with the peoples of the Americas. Although the countenances of these new people of the Atlantic—Atlantic creoles—might bear the features of Africa, Europe, or the Americas in whole or in part, their beginnings, strictly speaking, were in none of those places. Instead, by their experiences and sometimes by their persons, they were part of the three worlds that came together along the Atlantic littoral. Familiar with the commerce of the Atlantic, fluent in its new languages, and intimate with its trade and cultures, they were cosmopolitan in the fullest sense.¹⁵

As an "Atlantic creole," Equiano was ideally positioned to construct an identity for himself. He defined himself as much by movement as by place. Indeed he spent as much of his life on the water as in any place on land. Even while he was a slave, the education and skills he acquired with the Royal Navy rendered him too valuable to be used for the dangerous and backbreaking

labor most slaves endured. Service at sea on royal naval and commercial vessels gave him an extraordinary vantage point from which to observe the world around him. His social and geographical mobility exposed him to all kinds of people and levels of Atlantic society. The convincing account of Africa he offered to his readers may have been derived from the experiences of others he tells us he listened to during his many travels in the Caribbean, North America, and Britain. His genius lay in his ability to create and market a voice that for over two centuries has spoken for millions of his fellow diasporan Africans. His value for historians lies in his exemplary status as an "Atlantic creole," whose life and writings demonstrate the challenges and opportunities faced by eighteenth-century citizens of the world.

NOTES

1. W. E. B. Du Bois, "The Negro in Literature and Art," *Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science* (September 1913); reprinted in W. E. B. Du Bois, *Writings* (New York: Literary Classics of the United States, 1986), 863.
2. See my "Questioning the Identity of Olaudah Equiano, or Gustavus Vassa, the African," *The Global Eighteenth Century*, ed. Felicity Nussbaum (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2003), 226–35.
3. Adam Hochschild, *Bury the Chains: Prophets and Rebels in the Fight to Free an Empire's Slaves* (Boston: Houghton-Mifflin, 2005), 372.
4. Thomas Clarkson, *An Essay* (London, 1786), 117–18.
5. Quobna Ottobah Cugoano, *Thoughts and Sentiments on the Evil and Wicked Traffic of the Slavery and Commerce of the Human Species*, ed. Vincent Carretta (1787; repr., New York: Penguin, 1999), 15.
6. Kwame Anthony Appiah, *In My Father's House: Africa in the Philosophy of Culture* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1992), 191. I have adapted and applied to Equiano words that Appiah uses to describe the significance of his late father's life: "Only something so particular as a single life—as my father's life, encapsulated in the complex pattern of social and personal relations around his coffin—could capture the multiplicity of our lives in a postcolonial world."
7. Quoted in Appiah, *In My Father's House*, 177.
8. Elizabeth Isichei, *A History of the Igbo People* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1976), 21. John Thornton, *Africa and Africans in the Making of the Atlantic World, 1400–1800*, 2nd ed. (Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 310, notes, "Almost all we know about the [Igbo] region in the eighteenth century comes from the testimony of Olaudah Equiano, an Igbo who was enslaved as a youth around 1755." The fullest treatment of Equiano's claim to an Igbo identity is Alexander Byrd, "Eboe, Country, Nation and Gustavus Vassa's *Interesting Narrative*," *William and Mary Quarterly* 63 (January 2006): 123–48.
9. The most thorough treatment of the effects the transatlantic slave trade had on the conception and development of African identities during the early modern

period is John Thornton, *Africa and Africans in the Making of the Atlantic World*. On the absence of a pan-Igbo identity in Africa during the eighteenth century, see Sigismund W. Koelle, *Polyglotta Africana* (London, 1854), 7–8; Douglas B. Chambers, "My Own Nation': Igbo Exiles in the Diaspora," *Slavery and Abolition* 18 (1997): 72–97; Michael Gomez, *Exchanging Our Country Marks: The Transformation of African Identities in the Colonial and Antebellum South* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1998), 125–26; David Northrup, "Igbo and Myth Igbo: Culture and Ethnicity in the Atlantic World, 1600–1850," *Slavery and Abolition* 21 (2000): 1–20; Chambers, "Ethnicity in the Diaspora: The Slave Trade and the Creation of African 'Nations' in the Americas," *Slavery and Abolition* 22 (2001): 25–39 and "The Significance of the Igbo in the Bight of Biafra Slave-Trade: A Rejoinder to Northrup's 'Myth Igbo,'" *Slavery and Abolition* 23 (2002): 101–20.

10. Elizabeth Isichei, *A History of the Igbo People* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1976), 21. John Thornton, *Africa and Africans in the Making of the Atlantic World*, 20.
11. Philip D. Morgan, *Slave Counterpoint: Black Culture in the Eighteenth-Century Chesapeake and Lowcountry* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1998), 62–67. Stephen D. Behrendt, "Markets, Transaction Cycles, and Profits: Merchant Decision Making in the British Slave Trade," *William and Mary Quarterly* 58 (2001): 196.
12. Lorena S. Walsh, "The Chesapeake Slave Trade: Regional Patterns, African Origins, and Some Implications," *William and Mary Quarterly* 58 (2001): 139–70, 153.
13. In "Facts into Fiction: Equiano's *Narrative* Reconsidered," *Research in African Literatures* 13 (1982): 30–43, S. E. Ogude argues that because an eleven-year-old was very unlikely to have the almost total recall Equiano claims, "Equiano relied less on the memory of his experience and more on other sources" (32) in his account of Africa. And in "No Roots Here: On the Igbo Roots of Olaudah Equiano," *Review of English and Literary Studies* 5 (1989): 1–16, Ogude denies that linguistic evidence supports Equiano's account. Despite Ogude's skepticism about Equiano's veracity, he does not question Vassa/Equiano's fundamental identity as an African. G. I. Jones, "Olaudah Equiano of the Niger Ibo," *Africa Remembered: Narratives by West Africans from the Era of the Slave Trade*, ed. Philip D. Curtin (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1967), 60–69, finds Equiano's account of his "home and travels in Nigeria . . . disappointingly brief and confused." He believes that "the little he can remember of his travels is naturally muddled and incoherent" because Equiano "was only eleven years old when he was kidnapped" (61, 69). In her review of Paul Edwards, *The Life of Olaudah Equiano*, and Catherine Obianuju Acholonu, *The Igbo Roots of Olaudah Equiano*, *Journal of African History* 33 (1992): 164–65, Elizabeth Isichei remarks of Equiano's description of Africa, "I have come to believe that it is a palimpsest, and that though he was indeed an Igbo (though even this has been questioned) he fused his own recollections with details obtained from other Igbo into a single version" (165). Katherine Faulx Eze, "Self-Encounters: Two Eighteenth-Century African Memoirs from Moravian Bethlehem," in David McBride, LeRoy Hopkins, and C. Aisha Blackshire-Belay, eds., *Crosscurrents: African Americans, Africa,*

and *Germany in the Modern World* (Columbia, S.C.: Camden House, 1998), 29–52, considers “Equiano’s Igbo past [to be] mostly a reconstruction of European or Colonial American travel narratives, most obviously, Anthony Benezet’s *Some Historical Account of Guinea*,” 33, 50n22.

14. All quotations from Equiano’s works are taken from *The Interesting Narrative and Other Writings*, ed. Vincent Carretta (New York: Penguin, 2003) and are cited by page number parenthetically within the text.

15. Ira Berlin, “From Creole to African: Atlantic Creoles and the Origins of African-American Society in Mainland North America,” *William and Mary Quarterly* 33 (1996): 251–88; quotation from 254. I have substituted “Anglophone-African” for Berlin’s “African-American” because his characterization of the “Atlantic creole” can be applied to many English-speaking people of African descent on both sides of the Atlantic during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. Berlin uses the term *creole* to refer to a person of mixed cultures and languages. During the eighteenth century, a creole was someone of African or European descent who had been born in the Americas.

Construction of Identity

Olaudah Equiano or Gustavus Vassa?

Paul E. Lovejoy

Vincent Carretta claims that recently discovered documents concerning the baptism of Gustavus Vassa and his subsequent employment in the British navy “cast doubt” on the early life of the person usually recognized as Olaudah Equiano, author of *The Interesting Narrative of the Life of Olaudah Equiano, or Gustavus Vassa, the African. Written by Himself*.¹ The two documents in question are his baptismal record at St. Margaret’s Church in London and the muster records from the Arctic expedition of Sir John Phipps (later Lord Mulgrave) in 1773, both of which attest to his birth in South Carolina. Carretta casts his web of doubt even broader, suggesting that Vassa/Equiano was born in 1747, not 1745 as claimed in *The Interesting Narrative*, and certainly not in 1742, as I argue in an article appearing in *Slavery and Abolition*.² For Carretta, the author of *The Interesting Narrative* was a “self-made” man, adopting a public image as Olaudah Equiano, who had been born in Africa, when in fact he was known as Gustavus Vassa and had been born in South Carolina. For Carretta, “self-made” has a double meaning, including both his success in achieving his emancipation and becoming famous and the fictionalization of his childhood to achieve this end.

Does anyone care where Vassa/Equiano was born? Do a few years difference in when he might have been born matter? I would say the answer to both questions is positive, and Carretta’s analysis of the available data is seriously flawed and does not withstand the test of historical methodology. It may seem that the existence of two independent written documents stating place of birth is confirmation that Vassa was born in South Carolina, but if other evidence casts doubt on the documentation, there is a methodological

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challenge that pits memory against documentation. How is cultural information to be interpreted in the light of conflicting documentation, and what is the context of the documentation that might call the documents themselves into question or at least blur their possible significance?

According to Carretta, the recent discoveries suggest that "the author of *The Interesting Narrative* may have invented rather than reclaimed an African identity," and if this is the case, then it follows that "he invented his African childhood and his much-quoted account of the Middle Passage on a slave ship." In short, documentation for a South Carolina birthplace and problems in Vassa's own chronology of his youth raise sufficient grounds to express "reasonable doubt" about Vassa's claim to an African birth. Indeed Carretta considers that "the burden of proof . . . is now on those who believe that *The Interesting Narrative* is a historically accurate piece of nonfiction." This response therefore is in part a reaction to Carretta's challenge that "anyone who still contends that Equiano's account of the early years of his life is authentic is obligated to account for the powerful conflicting evidence."

The methodological issues relate to how historians engage oral tradition, memory, and other nonwritten sources with the written record. The information being conveyed has different meaning if Vassa was born in Africa or in South Carolina, at least to the historian. If he was an eyewitness to events and practices in Africa, it is one thing. If it is a composite of stories and information gathered from others, it is another matter, although clearly any account can be a combination of both. The issue here is whether there is sufficient evidence that Vassa's account of Africa is based on personal observation and experience or not. Despite some qualifications, Carretta essentially claims that the first part of *The Interesting Narrative* is a fictionalized account of life in Africa and the horrors of the Middle Passage, whereas I think that there is sufficient internal evidence to conclude that the account is essentially authentic, although certainly informed by later reflection, Vassa's acquired knowledge of Africa, and memories of others whom he knew to have come from the Bight of Biafra. The reflections and memories used in autobiography are always filtered, but despite this caveat, I would conclude that Vassa was born in Africa and not in South Carolina.

The significance of this man is not disputed. Vassa was an intellectual and political figure of heroic proportions. The difference is this: Carretta wants us to believe that he manufactured an account of his early life because he was a smart, creative, clever political and intellectual activist. He bent the truth to achieve a political end, the liberation of his people, and the ending of slavery, first through the abolition of the slave trade and eventually through

emancipation. The political activist and intellectual theorist had to merge the process of enslavement through the violence of kidnapping with the popular mind, gambling aversion to the fear of losing children would put pressure on the few people in Britain who actually voted for Members of Parliament and ultimately Parliament itself. It worked in that Britain abolished the slave trade in 1807, but whether or not Vassa was telling the truth about his birth or making it up for political ends has not been settled, apparently. I certainly agree with Carretta's assessment of Vassa's literary achievements: "He gave a voice to the millions of people forcibly taken from Africa and brought to the Americas as slaves." I think the evidence suggests that his voice was authentic because he personally experienced the Middle Passage. Carretta thinks Vassa was a creative author who used public memory to produce a literary text that was useful in the abolition movement and almost incidentally a work of art. Fraud can produce great art, but so can truth.

The North American connection is also firmly established, whether or not Vassa was born in South Carolina. He was in North America as a slave boy in Virginia, as a slave on a merchant ship and was allowed to trade on his own account, owned by a merchant from Philadelphia, and as an abolitionist in New York and Philadelphia on a visit from London, where he lived. His connection with Philadelphia was important; he must have met abolitionist Anthony Benezet, perhaps through his master, and was impressed by Quakers and their opposition to slavery. Vassa's autobiography had an influence on the slave-narrative literature in North America, probably more so than is yet apparent. How many times his early editions were passed around is simply not known, and there was significant number to require a second North American edition. At least, *The Interesting Narrative* is significant in terms of identification of a literature of resistance and antiracist paradigms advocated by African intellectuals. It can be accepted that Vassa was a man of the "Black Atlantic."

The controversy arises from the interpretation of Vassa's life before the summer of 1754, and here my reconstruction of the early years of Vassa's life varies considerably from that of Carretta. Perhaps we are pursuing historical understanding in different ways, Carretta pushing the evidence that casts doubts on what Vassa says and my own efforts to find out why there are contradictions, assuming that we are dealing with a historic figure who was an honest man and who did NOT deliberately and consciously deceive people. If he had, then he successfully fooled a large number of people in his own day, many of whom were very influential and intelligent. While Carretta appears to have uncovered evidence that Vassa was a fraud and that he knowingly lied,

I am asking the question: what if he was telling the truth? Then how do we account for evidence that conflicts with what he said? Moreover, when would he have invented his narrative, what evidence is there that helps to explain the construction of the narrative, and why would he deliberately have altered his natal home, and if he did, what is the evidence? How old would he have been? How did he sustain the deception, if he constructed an African birth but in fact was born in South Carolina? What are his reflections on being in South Carolina later in his life? The fact that he worked for Dr. Charles Irving on the Arctic expedition in 1773 and later was involved with Irving in the abortive plantation scheme on the Mosquito Shore in 1776 has not been examined carefully. On the Arctic expedition, Vassa registered his birth as being in South Carolina, while Irving hired him for the Mosquito Shore venture because he could speak the language of his "countrymen," that is, Igbo. The seemingly irrefutable evidence of the two documents is brought into question when examined in context.

The biggest lacuna in Carretta's scholarship is the answer to this question: where did Vassa learn his understanding of Igbo cosmology and society, indeed his knowledge of the Igbo language, as revealed in the vocabulary that he mentions in *The Interesting Narrative*? Did he learn it in the Carolinas before he was sold to Pascal? This is unlikely, since there were few Igbo in South Carolina, and he was not in Virginia long enough to meet anyone with whom he could speak, according to his own testimony, even though there were relatively many Igbo in the tidewater region. He was only there seven weeks, by his own account, which no one has disputed, and he met no one with whom he could speak. He clearly did not speak English, although by this time if he had come from Africa, he would have probably have begun to learn some words. If he had been born in South Carolina, he would have known English in the form spoken on plantations, a pidgin but nonetheless English. If he did understand Igbo, then, where and when did he learn it? A birth in Igboland and close contact with people who spoke his language of birth, that is, other speakers of the Igbo language, until he was almost twelve answers these questions. Does a birth in South Carolina suggest as conclusive evidence of origins? I would suggest not.

According to Carretta, Vassa's "account of Africa is a combination of printed sources, memory, and imagination," presumably Carretta means the memory of others who were responsible for what he was told, since Carretta believes him to have been born in South Carolina. This conception of memory seems to merge into "imagination," and hence fiction, but is it really safe to conclude that because Vassa had great literary skills that he made it up? I

think not, although he understood how to use language to convey a poignant story that in its telling might influence history, which it did. Anthony Benezet has been cited as a source, and it is clear that Benezet was an influence on Vassa's political development, which he duly acknowledges in *The Interesting Narrative*. But what could Vassa have learned? A close reading of Benezet's books and pamphlets reveals that he had absolutely nothing to say about Igboland or Igbo culture and society.³ His work, with its noble polemics of antislavery, is nothing more than long quotes, within quotation marks, of different sources to prove Benezet's point that slavery was evil and that everything possible should be done to stamp it out and abolish the slave trade. Benezet's ideological and moral position was an important influence in Vassa's comprehension of the political and religious aspects of abolition, but he was not a source of information on Africa. Vassa's reference to Benin, Libya, and Abyssinia are all clearly intended to situate his own people within the "Africa" with which he had come to identify.

Who were Vassa's confidants when he was writing *The Interesting Narrative* in 1788? And what did they believe? Why would they buy into a fraud, and what evidence is there for anyone doing so? Vassa was a person of principle, and he was an astute political observer. Rather than commit a fraud to achieve a political end of humanitarian proportions, he actually told the truth, at least there is overwhelming evidence that suggests as much. Carretta asks the question: "Why might Equiano have created an African nativity and disguised an American birth?" I would ask, When would he have done this, and what textual evidence is there for the invention, despite the baptismal register and the Arctic muster role? The evidence suggests that he knew Igbo as a language and had had personal contact with Igbo culture as a child. If he had manufactured this information, when could he have done it and on the basis of what authority?

According to Carretta, "Despite claiming to describe distinctively Igbo manners, he [Vassa] conflates accounts of various African ethnic groups to construct a kind of pan-African identity, a sort of essential African." Carretta does not make it clear which ethnic groups are conflated, and I would argue, to the contrary, Vassa provides the earliest information on several important Igbo institutions, including some insight into how these institutions operated before the middle of the eighteenth century. Most important, in my opinion, is Vassa's description of the *ichi* facial markings and their significance. Carretta's conclusion on the process of how ethnicity played itself out in the interior of the Bight of Biafra is based on no authority, while Vassa's account is compatible with the findings of numerous historians who have studied the

interior of the Bight of Biafra. Indeed I would assert that Vassa's description of his country and his people is sufficient confirmation that he was born where he said he was and, based on when boys received the *ichi* scarification, that he was about eleven when he was kidnapped, as he claims, which suggests a birth date of ca. 1742, not 1745 or 1747. A shift in the chronology this way is warranted on the basis of internal evidence in *The Interesting Narrative* and the fact that Pascal arrived in England in December 1754 with the slave boy he had named Gustavus Vassa.

If Carretta is correct about Vassa's age at time of baptism, accepting the documentary evidence, then he was a boy too young to have created a complex fraud about origins. If he were as old as I think he was at the time of baptism, he might have been able to have constructed such a story, but there is little proof that he did and some proof that he did not. The fraud must have been perpetrated later, but when? Certainly the baptismal record cannot be used as proof that he committed fraud, only that his godparents might have. But why would they have done so is the question, not what a slave might have said in St. Margaret's Church, where the Members of Parliament met for morning prayers before opening session. Vassa was in the sanctuary of power, probably the only slave ever baptized in St. Margaret's, and he was given a birthplace of South Carolina. Was this a social event, a fraud of another kind, a joke? He was, after all, none other than Gustavus Vassa, the savior of his people, named after the liberator of Sweden, and seems to have believed that he had been promised manumission on baptism. The text itself points to authenticity, not fraud. It is the detail in the baptismal registry that requires explanation. As Carretta observes, Vassa provides details during and after the Seven Years' War, which, when possible to verify, are remarkably accurate.

Vassa's description of Igbo cultural features are not generic African practices or some garbled merging of accounts, as has been claimed. Moreover, Carretta is not accurate in stating that "Modern scholars rightly point out that of the surviving brief eighteenth-century descriptions of the kingdom of Benin, Equiano's account of Igboland is the most fully developed." In my opinion, this is inaccurate because Vassa's account has nothing to do with the Kingdom of Benin, which Vassa added to his narrative on the basis of reading Benezet, who specifically did not discuss Igboland. Vassa was attempting to situate what he knew within the framework of what was known about Africa, and similarly he used such terms as *Libyan* and *Ethiopian* to try to achieve the same results. He also contrasted his people with Jews and Muslims, once again to establish similarities and differences with his own memories of his homeland. The relationship with the Kingdom of Benin is in fact

plausible, but only parts of Igboland west of the Niger River were tributary to Benin in the eighteenth century, and the area that Vassa was from almost certainly was not that part of Igboland but rather central Igboland to the east of the Niger River. While Vassa drew on published sources for what he knew about other parts of Africa, there is nothing in any of the known sources that he used that actually has anything to say about Igboland. His information has to have been derived from his own experience, whatever he learned in London from some of his own "countrymen."

According to Carretta, "critics and scholars have increasingly come to recognize that his account's apparent uniqueness does not guarantee its authenticity." In support of this contention, Carretta refers to various critics, including S. E. Ogude, who have seemed to have criticized the "Igboness" of Vassa's account, although it seems to me that the concerns of these critics are with issues of orthography and Vassa's attempts to render complex concepts understandable to an audience that had no knowledge of Africa and in which he himself had only partially understood as a boy. Ogude's criticisms are intended to demonstrate the difficulty of establishing where a boy named Equiano might have come from in Igboland, not that he did not come from there. Despite the identification of key Igbo words and concepts, it is not possible to be certain about the dialect, and hence Vassa's identification with a particular part of Igboland remains in doubt.

Vassa was one of the first to say he was an African and, in accordance with contemporary usage in Europe, to be equated with Ethiopians and Libyans. As Alexander Byrd has demonstrated, Vassa's use of these concepts reflects evolving meanings of nation and citizenship as discussed in the late eighteenth century.⁴ The term *Eboe* as used by Vassa had various meanings. In the eighteenth century, apparently, it was not a term that described a common ethnic identity because its implication was pejorative; it meant "other" people, both neighbors and foreigners, but who presumably spoke a dialect of Igbo and who in fact would now be recognized as Igbo. Vassa's use of these various terms and others, such as "countrymen" and "nation," are important examples of how Vassa and, by extension, others from Africa and of African descent were grappling with issues of identity and community.

Hence, it may appear that Carretta has a good case, much better than that of Vassa's critics who first challenged his claim of an African birth in 1792. The baptism record states age and place of birth, as does the Arctic muster book, despite differences in the derived date of birth, the baptism record suggesting a date of birth in 1747 and the Arctic list indicating 1745. The weakness in Carretta's argument arises from his understanding of the ethnography

and history of the interior of the Bight of Biafra. Moreover, Carretta's chronology for Vassa's life is not supported by the available evidence, and it is more likely that Vassa was born before he says he was, rather than later. This reconstruction suggests that he was about twelve when he first arrived in England, as he states in *The Interesting Narrative*, which we know to have been in December 1754. If he had been born in 1747, as Carretta has concluded, it is unlikely that he could have earned his freedom between 1763 and 1766, in fact earning much more than the cost of his ransom because he suffered from theft and nonpayment, which would have meant that he earned his freedom by the time he was nineteen. If this was the case, he would have been a most unusual young man indeed. If, however, he was born in 1742, he would have been baptized when he was seventeen, earning his freedom by the time he was twenty-four, which seems more plausible.

NOTES

1. Olaudah Equiano, *The Interesting Narrative and Other Writings*, ed. Vincent Carretta (New York: Penguin, 2003).

2. Paul E. Lovejoy, "Autobiography and Memory: Gustavus Vassa, alias Olaudah Equiano, the African," *Slavery and Abolition* 27 (2006): 317–47.

3. Anthony Benezet, *Some Historical Account of Guinea, Its Situation, Produce and the General Disposition of its Inhabitants with an Inquiry into the Rise and Progress of the Slave Trade, Its Nature and Lamentable Effects* (1771; London: Frank Cass, 1968). Benezet quoted at length various European observations of western Africa but nothing on the interior of the Bight of Biafra, skipping from the Kingdom of Benin to Kongo and Angola in his descriptions and reports. He quotes some information on Barbados that presumably Vassa could have used but not on his homeland.

4. Alexander X. Byrd, "Eboe, Country, Nation and Gustavus Vassa's *Interesting Narrative*," *William and Mary Quarterly* 63 (January 2006): 123–48.

Good-bye, Equiano, the African

Trevor Burnard

One of the interesting narratives in political and intellectual life in the last decade has been the reappearance of old-fashioned concerns about the importance of being truthful and the irretrievable damage that being caught in a lie does to a person's character. Whatever Bill Clinton did as president is overshadowed by his lie about his encounters with an intern that led him to falsely claim that "I did not have sex with that woman." Tony Blair's distinguished record is diminished for many Britons who, like me, believed him when he said that Iraq had weapons of mass destruction. In intellectual life, proponents of postmodernism suffered grievous blows when the postmodernist literary theorist Paul de Man was exposed as having obscured portions of his earlier life and suffered again when Alan Sokal, a physicist, submitted successfully a deliberately ridiculous article to a leading postmodernist journal. Periodic controversies about people assuming identities that were fabricated keep on emerging, such as when the distinguished scholar of early America Joseph Ellis was alleged to have invented a story about himself as a Vietnam War veteran. What is significant in all these cases is that the lie mattered, even in the last instance, where the lie was not related to what Ellis did. No one has suggested that Ellis writes untruths in his published work. Yet his rather harmless fabrication of a war past led to public humiliation.

Questions about lying have also become increasingly important in understanding the past, dramatically so in early American history, especially in the history of slavery. The biggest controversy has surrounded Thomas Jefferson, who has been shown, pretty much conclusively, to have fathered children with his slave Sally Hemings.¹ Less well publicized but of as much moment has been Michael Johnson's devastating demolition of a century-long scholarship that presumed that Denmark Vesey was the leader of a putative slave

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revolt in Charleston in 1822.² Another controversy has surrounded the discovery by Henry Louis Gates Jr. of a novel, *The Bondswoman's Narrative*, by Hannah Crafts, which Gates claimed as the only surviving novel about slavery written by an American female ex-slave. The problem here is that conclusive proof that the author was an ex-slave is missing. Although it probably shouldn't matter when evaluating literary excellence, whether Crafts was black or not makes all the difference in the world. As Gates notes in the case of Emma Dunham Kelly-Hawkins, a writer once thought to be black and now known to be white, when black writers are redefined as white, "people won't write about her any more," because what is important is discovering black voices not interesting new white writers.³

To my mind, the most intriguing discovery that a fundamental text in African American writing is not what it seems has been made by Vincent Carretta about Olaudah Equiano's *Interesting Narrative*. Carretta has discovered evidence—not conclusive but compelling enough for him to consider it more likely to be true than to be false—that Equiano was not an African but was probably born as a slave in South Carolina, of Igbo descent. Thus his vivid recollections of his childhood in Africa, his enslavement and transportation to the coast, and the trauma of the Middle Passage are inventions, "combinations of printed sources, memory, and imagination." Equiano was unable to resist, Carretta implies, the siren lure of becoming an authentic African voice describing the horrors of the transatlantic slave trade at a time when the abolitionist movement most needed such a voice. In market terms (and Equiano was acutely attuned to marketplace concerns—his construction of an Igbo identity was not a disinterested intellectual act but brought him sizeable financial benefits), Equiano saw a market need for a first-hand account of how Africans experienced the Middle Passage and proceeded to supply that voice, creating in the process an Igbo identity that probably did not exist at the time. If we accept Carretta's contention that Equiano was actually an American slave who had never lived in Africa, then Equiano is guilty of perpetrating two lies. He pretended to be offering an authentic account of himself as a victim of one of the great crimes in Western history when he was not a victim—partly in order to advance an honorable cause, partly to make money. He also invented himself as an Igbo and attempted to create, through his writings, a pan-Igbo identity that suggests more connections between peoples in Africa than actually existed. These are serious charges, which should lead us, in my opinion, to question whether Vassa is a reliable witness in other areas and which, by casting doubt upon his truthfulness, should also lead us to be more suspicious of his character and less effusive about his "genius," as Carretta sees it, and his "exemplary status as an 'Atlantic creole.'"

The new findings about Olaudah Equiano, or Gustavus Vassa, are the most difficult to deal with of all the recent reevaluations of what seemed to be established historical fact in the history of slavery in the Americas. We can cope with the fact that Jefferson had a private secret that made his relationship with black slavery particularly complicated. Scandals that discredit revered dead white men suit the mores of our cynical age. Finding out that the Denmark Vesey conspiracy existed only in the imaginings of South Carolinian slaveholders allows us to recast our attention with profit away from dealing with actual slave conspiracies toward an examination, along the lines we do with outbreaks of witchcraft hysteria in Salem, of why black behavior could encourage whites into panics about illusory slave plots.⁴ We can also accept that Hannah Crafts was not an ex-slave or even a black woman because in dealing with a novel, we do not mind as much as in other works whether the work is "true" or whether the author is as she says she is, provided that the work itself has, as several critics have claimed, an underlying power and aesthetic importance.⁵

But discovering that Equiano was probably not an African and that he probably made up his arresting passages on how he was enslaved as a child and transported across on the Middle Passage is a different matter, primarily because the authenticity of his account is so crucial to its lasting significance. We don't read *The Interesting Narrative* because it is well written, although Equiano does write well. We don't read it, moreover, in the way that Carretta seems to suggest it might now be read, as an intriguing example of how an African American could become a self-made man by refashioning his identity in response to changing circumstances. We read *The Interesting Narrative* because it is *true*; because it is an eyewitness account—the only one we have from a direct participant in the slave trade—of the cruelties of the Middle Passage, in particular, and Atlantic slavery, in general. The passages from *The Interesting Narrative* that are most used by teachers are precisely those whose authenticity is now most suspect. Equiano has become a canonical text because it has the ring of authenticity. We assign Equiano as a text because, as one teacher puts it, students "enjoy reading the first-person account of a well-educated and resourceful former slave whose life story is filled with remarkable adventures and great achievements."⁶ If it is not a first-person account of the travails of an African, then its appeal diminishes considerably. Indeed its appeal declines so much so that we can no longer use Equiano as a guide to the Middle Passage, painful as jettisoning his vivid prose about this crucial event is to our strategies for making it understandable.

Moreover, once we doubt whether Equiano was an African, it becomes harder, contra Carretta, to believe him in other areas. I have, for example,

always had my doubts about the provenance of his name: I have surveyed thousands of slave names in Jamaica and have never come across a name as outlandish as Gustavus Vassa. It also becomes more difficult to treat him, as Carretta urges us to do, as someone who can be relied upon to speak for others. Why would we allow a fabulist to do this? I can see Carretta's problem—his project was intended to praise Equiano, not to diminish him, and he has written a biography about the man—but I think that as well as reassessing how we interpret and use his autobiography, we need to reassess the man himself. Carretta always gives Equiano the benefit of the doubt. He is a “skillful and careful” writer. He gave a “voice” to millions of Africans, despite not perhaps being African himself, begging an obvious question of who should be allowed to speak for whom. He was a “pioneer” in creating an Igbo national identity—an identity that increasingly seems like a fabrication. He is “an even more profoundly self-made man than Franklin,” implicitly making a virtue out of his mistruths by equating him with another canonical figure in early American literature. He is a “masterful rhetorician,” whose shifting identities, some real, some invented, can be seen as not only natural but also admirably effective. In fact, Carretta concludes, it doesn't matter whether Equiano was an African or just pretended to be one, because “a diasporan African identity was as authentic as a native one.”

I beg to differ. If indeed Equiano was American, not African (and it should be noted that Carretta's doubts about his identity are founded on strong circumstantial evidence rather than on hard fact), then he has lied about the most important feature of his life. His detractors at the time recognized that it was his status as an authentic African voice that gave his account its power. The *Oracle* newspaper raised doubts about Equiano's parentage in 1792, claiming he was born in the West Indies. Significantly it concluded that the abolitionist cause would be damaged if it leant “for support on falsehoods as audaciously propagated as they are easily detected.” Equiano recognized the danger and castigated the newspaper for “invidious falsehoods” designed to “hurt my character, and to discredit and prevent the sale of my Narrative.”⁷ He was aware that a customary charge made against slaves and Africans were that they were habitual liars, able to mimic the works of others but unable to create anything fresh unaided by white assistance. Not being a liar was thus doubly important. It confirmed his victim status as genuine and proved that Africans were as capable as whites of writing believable and *true* narratives. If, however, Equiano was actually a liar, not a truth teller, then not only was a voice from Africa lost but also what racists said about Africans and their tendency to lie was correct. I don't think those writers were correct in

their estimation of the African character, but Equiano's elaborations, even though made in a good cause, make such a contention less plausible than it should be. For this reason, although we would love to have a first-hand account such as that in *The Interesting Narrative* that brings alive the Middle Passage and New World slavery, we have to say good-bye to Equiano as a guide to that experience. He may remain important as an example of black self-fashioning but in the great scheme of things, such importance is of limited and specialized interest. We may have to accept that, as Primo Levi argued for understanding the Holocaust, “the survivors are not the true witnesses” because the “true witnesses” are the “drowned, the submerged, the annihilated.”⁸ In my opinion, Equiano cannot remain a central figure in the reconstruction of the Atlantic world unless the doubt that Carretta has cast upon his authenticity as an African disappears.

NOTES

1. “Forum: Thomas Jefferson and Sally Hemings Redux,” *William and Mary Quarterly*, 3rd ser., 57 (2000): 121–210.
2. Michael Johnson, “Denmark Vesey and His Co-Conspirators,” *William and Mary Quarterly*, 3rd ser., 58 (2001): 915–76.
3. Elaine Showalter and English Showalter, “Every Single One Matters,” *London Review of Books*, August 18, 2005.
4. “The Making of a Slave Conspiracy, part 2,” *William and Mary Quarterly*, 3d Ser., 59 (2002): 166, 177–78.
5. Nina Baym, “The Case for Hannah Vincent,” in *In Search of Hannah Crafts: Critical Essays on “The Bondswoman’s Narrative,”* ed. Henry Louis Gates Jr. and Hollis Robbins (Basic Books, 2004), 315–31.
6. Angelo Costanzo, “Olaudah Equiano (1745–1797),” Houghton Mifflin College Division, <http://college.hmco.com/English/heath/syllabuild/iguide/vassa.html> (accessed February 18, 2008).
7. Quoted in Vincent Carretta, “Questioning the Identity of Olaudah Equiano, or Gustavus Vassa, the African,” in *The Global Eighteenth Century*, ed. Felicity A. Nussbaum (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2003), 227–28.
8. Primo Levi, *The Drowned and the Saved* (New York: Summit, 1988), ix.

Beyond Equiano

Jon Sensbach

Of course Olaudah Equiano matters. Vincent Carretta contends that the eighteenth-century's best-known person of African descent might have been born in South Carolina rather than in West Africa, as Equiano claimed in his autobiography. Whether we agree or not with Carretta—and I find his evidence quite intriguing—we'll read Equiano differently now and perhaps even more urgently. The possibility that he was born in America makes him more interesting, not less so; it opens up, rather than forecloses, inquiry into the autobiography and the world in which its author moved, giving new vitality to a man who's become something of a stick figure in recent years. For all the layers of meaning in his life's narrative, we'll need to excavate many more now. Whatever his birthplace, his autobiography remains the gold standard for the genre. So, yes, Equiano still matters. At the same time, this new version of his life poses new questions about the eighteenth-century black Atlantic that transcend its enigmatic exemplar himself.

It's easy to see how Equiano, after being virtually forgotten for 150 years, became an icon again in the late twentieth century. For modern students eager to hear the voice of the people, his story bears the same authentic witness to the slave trade and African survival as it did for antislavery activists two centuries ago. In our own writing and teaching, he's an irresistible resource, always handy with a quote or anecdote from his amazing "I was there" exploits to make the point for us. What were conditions like during the Middle Passage? Equiano endured them; through his description, we imagine the stench and shudder. How did African captives from different language groups communicate? He overheard their conversations through middlemen and learned several new languages himself; he'll tell us. What was it like for a young Igbo boy in America to hear a book "talk" for the first time?

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Undergraduates don't have to take the professor's word for it—they can read that memorable passage for themselves.

Equiano's autobiography, as Nell Painter has remarked, "works as a kind of founding myth for African American history," an epic tale of idyllic African life, Atlantic slavery, American self-liberation, and international leadership for human rights—one man's narrative of progress and redemption that represents the struggles of millions.¹ Equiano can be whatever we want him to be, equally popular among historians and literary scholars alike and a convenient bridge between them. When "identity" and "self-fashioning" became the buzzwords of the 1990s for both groups, Equiano furnished the perfect memoir to show how those slippery concepts could be applied to African narrators during the age of the slave trade.

Above all, as Carretta rightly notes, Equiano is a classic Atlantic creole, that new breed of people shaped not only by the confluence of Africa, Europe, and the Americas but by their own movement across and around the ocean between those points, a hybrid transnational group adept at maneuvering among a medley of people, languages, and situations. Creoles embodied a defining irony of the world that produced them. Scholars generally define the "Atlantic world" of the early modern period as the integrated and cohesive product of economic, social, and intellectual capital that flowed in many directions across the ocean—"a unitary whole, a single system," as Philip Morgan has described it.² Yet the lives of Atlantic creoles were anything but unified. Deploying multiple identities was their way of negotiating chaos and uncertainty, not coherence. We usually hail that strategy as a positive survival mechanism to cope with a system heavily weighted against them. But while we can applaud the creoles' savvy adaptability, we can forget that they were casualties of the Atlantic system as well, uprooted outcasts grasping for meaning and stability in a world that offered little.

In the light of Carretta's new version of Equiano's life, then, the question becomes: what kind of Atlantic creole was he? The answer is crucial. In his own time and in ours, an African birth validates his eyewitness claims to authenticity when describing his Igbo upbringing, his capture and tortuous forced journey to the African coast, and the Middle Passage, even though Equiano apparently drew upon other writers for these descriptions as well. In this scenario, originating directly from the African wellspring, he accumulates many layers of Atlantic acculturation as his life unfolds, eventually staking a claim to a black British identity. If, on the other hand, he had never been to Africa and never witnessed the Middle Passage, he becomes a very different and, in some ways, more complex creole whose memoir now calls for different readings that account for the vividness and rhetorical impact of his descriptions.

Imagine, for example, that as a young boy in mid-eighteenth-century South Carolina, Equiano grows up surrounded by speakers of Gullah, Igbo, and other African languages in a community where memories of Africa and the slave trade are alive and raw. Perhaps he absorbs and remembers as many stories as he can, acting as a kind of oral historian, a funnel or repository for communal memory. Later in life, as he gains literacy, facility in English, freedom, and mobility, he finds the opportunity—and feels an obligation—to use these stories in the antislavery struggle. He supplements these, as Carretta notes, with tales told him by many others during the course of his travels, repackaging them as his own to add veracity he knows white activists crave.

In this scenario—unprovable, yet no more fanciful than any other one can imagine in the face of conflicting evidence—a South Carolinian birth does not necessarily invalidate Equiano's story but recasts it with a different kind of authenticity. If he did not endure the Middle Passage himself, how else would he have learned about it and reported on it so persuasively from the perspective of the captives themselves but by listening, at some point, somewhere, to those who had? Proslavery defenders always contended that narratives of former slaves like Equiano were ghostwritten by white abolitionists, but perhaps it is closer to the truth that Equiano is a kind of ghostwriter for dozens or hundreds of people whose experiences live on in his words. He becomes a witness in the larger sense, testifying on behalf of people who had seen what he had not. Whatever is not strictly "true" in the narrative—whatever he did not actually see or do what he said he did—becomes a kind of larger Truth in its universalism. In that regard, the importance of his birthplace recedes in the face of his visionary politics. Equiano transforms himself from Carolina creole into "citizen of the world," spokesman for all people of African descent caught or at peril of being caught in the dragnet of slavery—a diasporan "Son of Africa," as Carretta suggests, and perhaps its first Afro-Atlantic griot with a chance to record his story.

Debates about Equiano's origins will furnish new ways of analyzing his autobiography for a long time; indeed, all of his observations now can potentially be reinterpreted as those of an American-born writer rather than of an African. Scholars of precolonial Africa, especially of Igbo culture and of the workings of the slave trade in West Africa and at sea, might need to reevaluate long-held assumptions. At the same time, even as we pause to reassess Equiano, we can profitably look for ways to use the lessons of his narrative to move beyond him. If Equiano's chief importance is as an exemplary Atlantic creole, then his story should encourage us to broaden the search for other compelling figures from the age of the slave trade who can tell us things

he cannot. Because of the long shadow cast by his narrative, Equiano has become an archetype, perhaps even a stereotype, of the black Atlantic—Anglophone, ex-slave, Christian, memoirist, often a sailor, invariably male. All of the most frequently anthologized ex-slave narrators from the eighteenth century—Venture Smith, James Albert Gronniosaw, John Marrant, John Jea, David George, and Equiano himself—meet nearly all of these criteria. Of course we like our source material to be accessible, and it is natural enough that we privilege authors over those who left no written record of their lives. As such, Equiano and, to a lesser extent, that small handful of other figures have become stand-ins for the vast numbers of unnamed people who could not speak or write for themselves and whose travails went unremembered. But it sometimes seems that we have allowed our reliance on these autobiographies to shape and limit the questions we ask and to keep us from digging deeper and wider for sources into other kinds of Atlantic experience.

As Equiano demonstrates, we can learn much from a single life played out in diverse corners of the Atlantic littoral, a life characterized by movement, by pliable identities, by intermingling with and sliding between a kaleidoscope of people and languages, and by a determination to find order amid chaos. It's remarkable that we still know of so few such lives, but I'm convinced there are more of them out there than we suspect, people we haven't looked for or haven't realized can be found, people who moved around more commonly than we think between American destinations, Europe, and even Africa itself, and whose stories can be told in greater detail than we imagine. We won't necessarily find them in the usual places. They will come from far more heterogeneous points on the Atlantic compass—from Portuguese, French, Spanish, Dutch, German, or even unknown English documents, lying in overlooked boxes in an archive in Paris, Lisbon, Havana, Amsterdam, or Accra, perhaps in an unexpected provincial archive somewhere. Their biographies, when and wherever we can find them, might not be as well documented as Equiano's, and they may lack the firsthand power of his narrative. But they will be extensive enough to remind us, as his does, of the humanity of the millions snared in the slave trade and of the incredible diversity of their identities—Angolan, Koromantee, Brazilian, Jamaican, French, Muslim, Catholic, Lutheran, escapee, soldier, preacher, victim, survivor, male, female. A central figure in my own research, Rebecca Proppen, was a free person of color in the eighteenth century who spoke Dutch, Danish, German, and English, helped organize black Christian congregations in the Caribbean, lived in Germany for twenty years, and spent the last years of her life on the Gold Coast. Such lives and those of others we might reconstruct reaffirm that there

was no quintessential Atlantic creole personality or experience but that the multiplicity of experiences is itself the defining feature of the black Atlantic.

Equiano never claimed to be the quintessence of anything, but he did claim to be representative. More than two hundred years later, he still is, though what he represented in his time and what he represents in our own have, thanks largely to Carretta, become more complicated questions. Yes, Equiano matters.

NOTES

1. Nell Painter, quoted in Jennifer Howard, "Unraveling the Narrative," *Chronicle of Higher Education*, September 9, 2005, 3.

2. Philip D. Morgan, "The Cultural Implications of the Atlantic Slave Trade: African Regional Origins, American Destinations, and New World Developments," *Slavery and Abolition* 18 (1997): 122.

Response to Lovejoy, Burnard, and Sensbach

Vincent Carretta

The three responses elicited by my initial essay fall into two distinct categories. Burnard and Sensbach, coming to opposite conclusions, consider possible implications of the recently discovered evidence in baptismal and naval records that suggest that Equiano may have invented an African birth. Lovejoy, however, challenges the validity of the evidence by mocking the sincerity of the baptismal record and ignoring the questions raised by the muster lists in 1773. Since Lovejoy also says that my "analysis of the available data is seriously flawed and does not withstand the test of historical methodology," I feel a bit like Equiano, who believed that some of his critics wrote "with a view to hurt [his] character, and to discredit and prevent the sale of [his] book." And like Equiano, I feel compelled to issue an apology in my own defense.

I am grateful to Lovejoy for citing my recently published biography, *Equiano, the African: Biography of a Self-Made Man* (2005). Lovejoy acknowledges that "perhaps we are pursuing historical understanding in different ways." I agree completely and would add that we argue "in different ways" as well. Assuming that the historian's role is to reconstruct and interpret the past in the light of the available evidence and that speculation (like faith) should begin when the evidence runs out, as an editor, biographer, and historian I began with the working hypothesis that Equiano was being as truthful as possible in writing his autobiography. I also assume that my hypothesis must be falsifiable, subject to possible revision or rejection in the face of new evidence. And I assume that conclusions drawn from the evidence, as well as speculation beyond the evidence, should be located on a spectrum ranging from the impossible through the improbable and probable

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to the certain. I am obligated to give my readers the evidence they need to appreciate my assessment of it and to be able to assess it for themselves. Consequently, constrained by my methodology, I cannot say, as Lovejoy does, that Equiano “must have met abolitionist Anthony Benezet” in Philadelphia, without offering some evidence in support.

If we can identify the tree by the fruit it bears, Lovejoy’s methodology is more supple and liberating than my own. So, too, is his understanding of argument. He appears to subscribe to a school of literary critics who believe that a writer’s intentions cannot be derived from his or her writings. Consequently the critic bears the responsibility for determining meaning in a text, which may be “read against the grain,” allowing the critic to divine that the writer means something different from, even opposite to, what he or she actually says. Lovejoy exercises his powers of divination on my own writings. Thus, although he initially accurately quotes me as saying that “the author of *The Interesting Narrative* may have invented rather than reclaimed an African identity,” a paragraph later we learn that “despite some qualifications, Carretta essentially claims that the first part of *The Interesting Narrative* is a fictionalized account.” The argumentative slope rapidly becomes slipperier. Several lines later we learn that “Carretta wants us to believe that he manufactured an account of his early life.” And within a few more paragraphs we are in free fall: “Carretta believes him to have been born in South Carolina,” and we discover that “Carretta has concluded” that “he had been born in 1747.” Understandably, once we get on the slippery slope of this line of reasoning, the quotations from my writings disappear.

Although I confess that I find it interesting to be told what I mean, I might have been more convinced had Lovejoy devoted more space to quoting what I actually say. Readers of this forum can judge for themselves the extent to which I qualify my analysis of the likelihood that Equiano may have fabricated an African birth to achieve the dual and complementary ends of serving the abolitionist cause and making money. Look at the number of times the words *may*, *might*, *if*, and *whether* appear in my initial essay and other writings on the subject. If I have foreclosed the possibility that Equiano’s account of an African birth and upbringing is accurate, why have I spent so much energy trying to identify the ships that may have brought Equiano from Africa to Barbados and from there to Virginia? I thought I did so because, as I have said repeatedly, the circumstantial evidence that Equiano was born in South Carolina may be persuasive, but it is not conclusive, dispositive though not probative. Lovejoy seems to confuse inclination with conviction. I assume that when I disagree with someone I am obligated to represent that person’s position as accurately as possible.

Lovejoy’s own convictions lead to some intriguing argumentation. Evidence can falsify my hypothesis; Lovejoy’s thesis that Equiano was born in Africa apparently can falsify evidence. I do not have space here to treat the minute particulars of his discoveries, such as a hitherto unknown “second North American edition” of Equiano’s autobiography. Lovejoy slides effortlessly from supposition to certainty. He begs the question he raises of whether Equiano was fluent in Igbo by asserting that “Irving hired him for the Mosquito Shore venture because he could speak the language of his ‘countrymen,’ that is, Igbo,” without offering any evidence to support his claim for Irving’s motive. Nor does he consider qualification and annotation Equiano added to “countrymen” in later editions, additions very problematic for his assertion. Irving is mentioned in a non sequitur to the briefest of allusions to what for Lovejoy is probably a very annoying piece of evidence, the 1773 muster lists for the Arctic expedition on which Equiano, now a free man and the source of the information, is identified three separate times as having been born in South Carolina. Lovejoy does not even apply his powers of divination to attempt to explain why Equiano would have said he was born in America just fifteen years before he would claim in print an African birth. Lovejoy might have suggested that Equiano was trying to keep the naval record consistent with his earlier baptismal record, but he forecloses that opportunity by mockingly dismissing the latter with the question, “Was this a social event, a fraud of another kind, a joke?” To do so, Lovejoy must completely ignore Equiano’s own comments about the piety of his godparents, his desire to be baptized, and Pascal’s resistance. Apparently sometimes Equiano is reliable and sometimes not. As literary critic, Lovejoy gets to choose.

One choice Lovejoy makes is to reject both Equiano’s own claim to a birth date of 1745 and his baptismal record’s date of circa 1747. As I have said several times in print, both dates can at best be only approximate, and *if* either is correct, Equiano was younger than he says he was when he entered an English-speaking environment. Very few biological markers indicate age before adulthood: one is the loss of baby teeth around the age of seven; another is the onset of puberty. Explicitly accepting my discovery that Equiano first reached England in December 1754, years before he claims, and implicitly embracing my argument that the younger Equiano was when he came under Pascal’s control the less credible his account of Africa would have been, Lovejoy has little choice but to imagine a date of birth significantly earlier than 1747. His supposition, however, has unanticipated consequences. Employing logic that I confess eludes me, Lovejoy argues that since Equiano had not “received the *ichi* scarification,” he “was about eleven when he was kidnapped.” Even if we accept Lovejoy’s assumption that Equiano was taken

from Africa, where he would have been destined to receive the scarification after the onset of puberty, all that the absence of such marking would prove was that he was younger than eleven but not necessarily eleven. Boys in the Royal Navy ranged in age from six to eighteen. Pascal's promotion of Equiano in late 1762, when he was around the age of eighteen according to Equiano's own and the documentary evidence, thus makes sense. Lovejoy would have him in his early twenties at the time. For the 1759 baptismal record, which says that Equiano was twelve years old, to be off by a year or two before puberty is plausible. But to have it off by five years, as Lovejoy contends, should place Equiano well into puberty at the age of seventeen. As a seventeen-year-old, he would have been far more likely to have had a say in what was recorded and to have later remembered what was recorded. And his godparents and witnesses should have noticed the difference between a child and an adolescent. Lovejoy completely avoids the question of why in his autobiography Equiano suppresses the records of a South Carolina birth. My methodology requires me to at least attempt to account for why those records exist in fact and why they are absent in his narration. But, as Lovejoy supposes, "we are pursuing historical understanding in different ways."

Lovejoy's questions about why Equiano might have fabricated an identity and why such a fabrication would not have been discovered or betrayed are sufficiently answered, I hope, in my initial essay and other writings, especially the biography. In the latter I trace as carefully as I can the evolution of Equiano's African identity before he published his *Interesting Narrative*. Whether or not he fabricated that identity, Equiano very likely knew that the problematic baptismal and naval records existed. He might have acknowledged them in his *Narrative* and explained their existence. Instead, assuming that he had not forgotten them, he chose to suppress them. My methodology obligates me to at least try to account for such likely suppression.

Lovejoy agrees with me that Equiano constructed and fashioned an African identity at least in part for rhetorical purposes, "to situate what he knew within the framework of what was known about Africa," to quote Lovejoy again. Although Lovejoy faults me for associating Benin and Igboland, as Equiano does, several sentences later he acknowledges that "the relationship with the Kingdom of Benin is in fact plausible." Lovejoy correctly points out that in my essay I do not make "clear which ethnic groups are conflated" in Equiano's account of Igboland. Possible sources in the writings of Benezet, William Smith, Thomas Astley, Michel Adanson, John Matthews, James Field Stanfield, and John Wesley, among others, are identified and discussed in my biography. Readers can judge the fairness of Lovejoy's insinuation that

I misrepresent other critics by looking at footnote 13 in my essay. The very few Igbo words Equiano mentions in his autobiography do not demonstrate fluency. In another non sequitur, Lovejoy acknowledges an alternative source for Equiano's description of Igboland: "His information has to have been derived from his own experience, whatever he learned in London from some of his own 'countrymen.'" According to Equiano's own account, of the six people he identifies as witnesses that he "could speak no language but that of Africa" when he "first arrived in England," none met him before he had already spent years in an English-speaking environment. And none attests to where he learned the language of Africa. As I have said and written on numerous occasions, we will probably never know for certain whether Equiano was born in Africa or South Carolina.

Accepting the possibility that Equiano may have fabricated his natal African identity, Burnard and Sensbach disagree with each other on the implications of that possibility. My own position on the issue is obviously much closer to Sensbach's than to Burnard's. According to Burnard, if Equiano's account of the Middle Passage is fictitious in the sense of not having happened to him personally, then historians must bid him farewell as a useable primary source. And if Equiano fabricated in this instance, Burnard argues, "it becomes harder . . . to believe him in other areas." Burnard also says that I "always give Equiano the benefit of the doubt." Mea culpa. Acknowledging that partisanship is a biographer's occupational hazard, I would also stress that in editing his writings and reconstructing his life, I have tried to be as scrupulous as possible in verifying the information he gives us. With the very notable exceptions of Equiano's baptismal record and the 1773 muster list, wherever a written record exists that would enable us to falsify his account, I have found him to be stunningly accurate and reliable. The problem, of course, is that much of what Equiano tells us, especially in the first two chapters of his autobiography, is not falsifiable by external evidence. One of Burnard's specific doubts about Equiano concerns "the provenance of his name," Gustavus Vassa, a doubt I am not sure that I understand, perhaps because the name is so extraordinary, as Burnard notes. It is a godsend to his editor and biographer. Whenever we find a late-eighteenth-century reference to a black man named Gustavus Vassa, we can be reasonably sure that the referent is the person now best known as Equiano. I have found no reason to doubt Equiano's own account of the name's provenance, in large part because *Gustavus Vassa* is the name he used in private throughout his life. Various spelled, it appears on muster lists from 1755 to 1773, and it remained his legal name throughout his adult life, found on his marriage record and will.

If the authenticity of Equiano's account of Africa and the Middle Passage is the primary, even only, reason historians value his life and autobiography, then many historians may agree with Burnard's conclusion that we would "have to say good-bye to Equiano as a guide to that experience" if he imaginatively reconstructed his early years. But as the conversation in this forum demonstrates, the argument about whether Equiano was a native African and the implications of the answers to that question render him historically important. The rhetorical exigency of the reclamation or invention of his African identity will probably always be historically important. Furthermore, as Sensbach points out, "Whatever is not strictly 'true' in the narrative—whatever he did not actually see or do what he said he did—becomes a kind of larger Truth in its universalism." Paradoxically, Equiano's voice is so representative of the millions of fellow people of African descent who suffered the Middle Passage and its equally horrific aftermath because his own life was so atypical. Unlike those to whom he gave a voice, because of the training and education he gained during and after his years with the Royal Navy, Equiano never experienced the grinding agricultural existence endured by the vast majority of his enslaved contemporaries. As Sensbach notes, Equiano may have been "acting as a kind of oral historian, a funnel or repository for communal memory." If he had not experienced the Middle Passage himself, he could have heard detailed accounts of it from friends like Quobna Ottobah Cugoana. I agree with Sensbach that if Equiano engaged in self-fashioning, his life and *Interesting Narrative* raises "complicated questions" about the choices of identity available to diasporan Africans.

Wherever one stands on the issue of the authenticity of the first two chapters of his autobiography, Equiano retains his historical significance. As Burnard implies, his literary significance is unquestioned. Through a combination of natural ability, accident, and determination, Equiano seized every opportunity to rise from the legal status of being an object to be sold by others to become an international celebrity, the story of whose life became his own most valuable possession. Once free from enslavement, his every action reflected his repudiation of the constraints bondage had imposed on him. As if to flaunt his liberty, he traveled the world virtually at will, recognizing the sea as a bridge rather than a barrier between continents and people. His freedom gave him the chance to move socially, economically, religiously, and politically, as well as geographically. Having known what the loss of liberty entailed, once free he took as much control of his life as he could, perhaps even revising the events in it to make a profit in a just cause.

Print enabled Equiano to resurrect himself publicly from the "social death" enslavement had imposed on him and millions of others. A genius at self-representation and self-promotion, he is a major figure in the history of the book. He defied convention by writing his autobiography and then publishing, marketing, and distributing it himself. He became the first successful professional writer of African descent in the English-speaking world. By retaining the copyright to his book, he maintained control over his "round unvarnished tale," enabling him to make changes in every one of the nine editions he published of his autobiography. The motivation for his behavior may have been as much psychological as financial. Far more than other authors, the formerly enslaved Equiano was aware of the consequences of losing control over one's own physical self and legal identity. That heightened awareness may help explain why he refused to relinquish control over the verbal and visual representations of his free self. He had spent too much time and effort establishing an identity to allow anyone else to claim ownership of it.

Equiano also defied convention by marrying a white Englishwoman and making sure that his racist opponents knew that he had done so. He announced his wedding in every edition of his autobiography from 1792 on. Mentioning his marriage was probably intended to serve a larger purpose as well: "If any incident in this little work should appear uninteresting and trifling . . . I can only say . . . that almost every event of my life made an impression on my mind. . . . I early accustomed myself to look at the hand of God in the minutest occurrence, and to learn from it a lesson of morality and religion; and in this light every circumstance I have related was to me of importance." Equiano's marriage to Susanna Cullen in 1792 anticipated the commercial union Equiano advocated between Africa and Europe. Similarly, rejected in his attempts to be sent by Europeans to Africa as a missionary or diplomat, through his *Interesting Narrative*, Equiano made himself into an African missionary and diplomat to a European audience. In the recreation of his own life, he forged a compelling story of spiritual and moral conversion to serve as a model to be imitated by his readers.

Unfortunately Equiano did not live to see the abolition of the slave trade he had done so much to accomplish. The political triumph of the abolitionist cause in 1807 came ten years too late for him to celebrate. It might not have come that soon, however, had he not contributed to the cause by so skillfully and creatively fashioning the story of his life "to put a speedy end to a traffic both cruel and unjust." He gave the abolitionist cause the African voice it needed. The role he played in the last mission of his life earned him

the right to claim an African name that “signifies vicissitude, or fortunate also; one favoured, and having a loud voice and well spoken.” That role also entitled him to accept the name of a European liberator of his people ironically given him in slavery. He had made himself a true “citizen of the world.”

Further Readings

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Atlantic History

This section is expanded from a reading list supplied by Trevor Burnard and published in *Historically Speaking* 7 (July/August 2006): 21.

- Armitage, David, and Michael J. Braddick. *The British Atlantic World, 1500–1800*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2002.
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