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Olaudah Equiano's Biography: Fact or/and Fiction

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Abstract
This article analyzes the documentation available in an attempt to settle the controversy over the "true" date and place of birth of Olaudah Equiano, or Gustavo Vassa, the African. Several original documents are analyzed, and the data is compared to the information provided by the author himself in his *The Interesting Narrative of the Life of Olaudah Equiano, or Gustavus Vassa, the African. Written by Himself*, first published in London, in 1789. According to these documents (a baptismal record and a muster book), he was not born in Africa, in Igboland (in today's Nigeria) as he argued in his autobiography, but in South Carolina, as he declared before those who recorded the information in the official documents. The issue of authenticity is more relevant for historical research than for literary criticism; in the case of the latter, the accuracy of the data does not significantly impact upon the literary value of his work. In conclusion, the dispute is pertinent only in the liminal space where the two contexts (historical research and literary analysis) overlap, and it currently operates with information whose relevance and usefulness depend on the framework against which it is judged.

Keywords: Olaudah Equiano, Gustavus Vassa, autobiography, slave narrative, *The Interesting Narrative*.

In the preface to his *Equiano, the African: Biography of a Self-made Man*, Vincent Carretta describes Olaudah Equiano, the author

of *The Interesting Narrative of the Life of Olaudah Equiano, or Gustavus Vassa, the African. Written by Himself*, published in London, in 1789, as "the epitome of what the historian Ira Berlin has called an 'Atlantic creole'" (xiii), adding that "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" (369).

Indeed, everything in Equiano's life has a dual nature (this duality is first assumed by himself in the title of *The Interesting Narrative*): he was both an African and an Atlantic creole; he was both a slave and, later, a free man; he was both a pagan and, later, a Christian, and he was both Equiano and/or Gustavus Vassa, the African. Moreover, his biography "written by himself" is both the "interesting" (true) story of his life and/or a fictionalized "narrative" of the life of a former slave who had the resources and the freedom to write what is today "universally accepted as the fundamental text in the genre of the slave narrative" (Carretta xii). Equiano lived enough to see the ninth edition of *The Interesting Narrative*, which was quite popular in the first decades of the 19th century on both sides of the Atlantic, before it was (along with the author himself) almost completely erased from the public conscience for another hundred years; according to Carretta, this "erasure" was produced by the increasing interest in the abolition of slavery in the United States, generated by the effects of the Act of Abolition passed on March 25th, 1807, by the British Parliament: "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" (xii–xiii).

Symbolically, this coincided with the discovery, in 1857, of his other name on the gravestone of his child: "Gustavus Vassa the African," a name that he seemed to prefer to his African name, Equiano. According to Brycchan Carey's "Olaudah Equiano: A Bibliography," Equiano returned under the spotlight of anglophone scholarship in the second half of the twentieth century, thanks to

the efforts of scholars such as Henry Louis Gates Jr. (who reprinted the 1814 "corrected" edition of *The Interesting Narrative*, preceded by an introduction he authored, in 1987), Wilfred D. Samuels (who published a new edition, with an introduction, in 1988), Paul Edwards (who edited the 1989 Longman edition and wrote an introduction), Robert J. Allison (who reprinted the 1791 New York edition), Vincent Carretta (who edited the 1995 and the 2003 Penguin editions and also wrote the introduction and the notes; the 2003 edition also contains letters and press articles), Werner Sollors (who edited the 2001 Norton Critical Editions version, a reprint of the first edition, enriched with numerous valuable contextual documents), Angelo Costanzo (who also edited a reprint of the first edition in 2001), Shelly Eversley (editor) and Robert Reid Pharr (author of the introduction to the 2004 Random House Modern Library reprint of the ninth edition), and, finally, Carey, who wrote the introduction, notes and index to the latest, 2018 Oxford University Press edition of *The Interesting Narrative*.

Recent scholarship challenges the authenticity of Equiano's "narrative," as well as his African birth, while also emphasizing the fundamental impossibility of assigning an American or a British identity to "Gustavo Vassa the African":

> 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 for 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. (Carretta xiii)

In other words, if he was not born in Africa, but in South Carolina (as baptismal and naval records show), if he was never on a slave ship crossing the Atlantic, then he is a far better writer than originally thought, a writer whose "literary achievements have been vastly underestimated" (Carretta xiv), and whose "interesting" autobiography, one of the first pieces belonging to the genre of

slave narrative, is (at least partly) fictionalized. Carretta's position is by no means governed by total "conviction," but by what he calls "reasonable doubt," doubled by the feeling that we might never find more (reliable) information about Equiano's birth and childhood; he also admits that this issue is far more important for Equiano's biographers who have looked at *The Interesting Narrative* as an autobiography belonging to the genre of nonfiction, an invaluable source of truthful, historical, eyewitness information on Africa and on the slave trade, provided by a person who lived in the 18th century and took an active part in the events he describes (xv).

Carretta's position sparked controversy and triggered a strong reaction from "defenders" of the authenticity of both man and work, bringing even more "factual" information as evidence in support of Equiano's African birth. One such reaction came from Paul E. Lovejoy, who published an article titled "Autobiography and Memory: Gustavus Vassa, alias Olaudah Equiano, the African" in 2006, one year after Vincent Carreta's *Equiano, the African: Biography of a Self-made Man*. Lovejoy straightforwardly announces his perspective in the title of his article, reversing the original order (cf. the title of the autobiography *The Interesting Narrative of the Life of Olaudah Equiano, or Gustavus Vassa, the African. Written by Himself*) of the African's names, whom he refers to as: "Gustavus Vassa, alias Olaudah Equiano" (even though, below, in the text, the two names are used in the original sequence, just as Equiano uses them in the title of his autobiography).

In brief, Lovejoy argues that, despite the evidence against this claim, Equiano was indeed born in Africa, in the Bight of Biafra (today's Nigeria), and that his mother tongue was Igbo (a language of the Niger-Congo family); regarding his name, Lovejoy prefers Gustavo Vassa, his slave and Christian name, while Olaudah Equiano, his African name, is "reserved for the subject of his autobiography." According to the Canadian scholar, all the factual information in the baptismal and naval records may be countered with "circumstantial evidence," due to the special relationship between autobiography and memory, and ultimately on the grounds that Equiano himself decided what to share and how to

construct his narrative (318). Using the methodology and language of historical research, Lovejoy associates the alleged (or documented, if we were to believe Carretta) fictional character of the fragments related to his birth and childhood with lying, with "propagating a falsehood," which thus both impacts upon Equiano's obvious political merits and his success as the author of an authentic, invaluable nonfictional work: "If he was not born in Africa, then he lied, perhaps with noble political motives, but nonetheless propagating a falsehood, since kidnapping and sale into slavery were the central features of his autobiography, intended for political reasons to advance the cause of abolition. His book sold well because he was an 'authentic' African" (320).

Chronologically, Equiano's "African birth" came under attack during his lifetime, and he addressed the issue himself in a "Letter to the Reader" (the letter in edition 6 is dated "London, Dec. 30, 1792," that in edition 7, "London, August 1793," while that in editions 8 and 9 is dated "Edinburgh, June 1792") published in editions 5 to 9, in response to the accusations that appeared in *The Oracle* and then in *The Star* (see notes 1-3, 8, Equiano 237).

> TO THE READER
> AN invidious falsehood having appeared in the Oracle of the 25th, and the Star of the 27th of April 1792, with a view to hurt my character, and to discredit and prevent the sale of my Narrative, asserting, that I was born in the Danish island of Santa Cruz, in the West Indies, it is necessary that, in this edition, I should take notice thereof, and it is only needful for me to appeal to those numerous and respectable persons of character who knew me when I first arrived in England, and could speak no language but that of Africa. (Equiano 5)

However, the first sign that Equiano's "African birth" (date and place, altogether) might be a fabrication is the impossible arithmetic of the numbers related to his own account of his early years and those in the baptismal and naval records. The baptismal record of St. Margaret's Church, for 9 February 1759, reads:

"Gustavus Vassa a Black born in Carolina 12 years old" ("Baptism of 'Gustavus Vassa'").

Simple, possible, based-on-figures arithmetic tells us that Equiano was born in 1747 and not in 1745, as he states in *The Interesting Narrative*. The Royal Navy muster roll of the *Racehorse*, which contains information provided by Equiano himself, as well as the baptismal record, contains an entry (it was filled in 1773) mentioning a seaman aged 28 named "Gustavus Weston," born in South Carolina. As Lovejoy observes, the whole situation might be the result of a misunderstanding; in other words, Equiano did not know the exact date of his birth and thus made assumptions:

> In my opinion, Vassa guessed when he was born, based on his own calculations of when he thought he arrived in England and the fixed date of his baptism in 1759. In 1773, he thought he was 28, and hence born in 1745, which makes the evidence of the Arctic muster book consistent with the chronology of his early childhood as he initially published it in the first edition of *The Interesting Narrative*. . . . The idea that he was almost 12 when he arrived in England is consistent with his estimate of his age when he was kidnapped, at age 11. He must have thought he was 14 when he was baptized, not 12, as recorded, because he thought he had arrived in England in 1757. In fact, he would have been at least 16, not 12, since he actually reached England in December 1754. (324)

The Canadian scholar settles the dispute regarding Equiano's date of birth, by using the data available on file and by pointing out that the alleged "falsehood" is the result of the author's impossibility to determine his real date of birth. He actually did not know when he was born, and, thus, he provided those who recorded information about him with the dates that seemed most plausible. At best, all these are mere approximations. Moreover, he does not seem to use his birth date as the starting point in building a chronology of his life, but the age when he was enslaved (Lovejoy 325). Reasonably enough, his enslavement is the most important, "memorable" event

in his life, and the origin of all the other "memorable" events in his personal and political life.

Starting from this assumption, Lovejoy argues that Equiano's memories of his early age (his enslavement, the journey on the slave ship) look more like the memories of an 11-year-old boy, than those of a younger person. Thus, and this is probably one of the most plausible chronologies of Olaudah Equiano's life so far, he was 11 (he was born in 1742/1743) when he was enslaved; he reached England when he was 12 (and was bought by Pascal); he was baptized at 17; he was 20 when he was sold back to the West Indies; he was 24 when he became a free man; he was 31 (not 28) when he was on the *Racehorse*; he published *The Interesting Narrative of the Life of Olaudah Equiano, or Gustavus Vassa, the African. Written by Himself* in 1789, when he was 47, and he died in 1797, when he was 55 (325). In brief, Equiano/Vassa was born in 1742 and died in 1797.

Going back to the other controversy regarding Equiano's place of birth, Lovejoy states his opinion that, if we were to take the chronology he proposes as accurate, and we were to carefully look at the details recorded in his *The Interesting Narrative*, then Vassa was indeed born in Africa, in Ingboland:

> In my opinion a careful reading of the linguistic, geographical and cultural details provided by Vassa leaves little doubt that he was born in Africa, and specifically in Igboland. In methodological terms, written documentation confronts oral sources and traditions, as related through the memories of an individual and filtered with acquired information from a variety of sources.
> . . . The preponderant evidence derived from culture and context confirms his African birth, in my opinion, and the documents that claim otherwise have to be interpreted accordingly. (325)

In conclusion, even though the information in both Carretta's and Lovejoy's analyses seems (in general) exact, their interpretation sounds, in most cases, subjective (almost as subjective as *The Interesting Narrative* itself). However, Carey's assertion might be closer to the truth and less tentative in this context: "Both positions

are, ultimately, based on faith rather than evidence" ("Olaudah Equiano: African or American?" 237). After all, Equiano's true identity and birth date may never be revealed, but, for the time being, despite the (still open) scholarly debate, one thing is clear: the documents available contain information that he himself provided (and, apparently, he had no reason to lie to those who recorded the data; at least in the case of the baptismal record, he said he was born in South Carolina because that was the truth), while *The Interesting Narrative of the Life of Olaudah Equiano, or Gustavus Vassa, the African. Written by Himself* is an autobiography, which contains both truthful and not always verifiable information that he collected during his life about the events and the places he mentions. That is why the possibility that he might have included subjective interpretations of the events as well as fictionalized accounts of real people (himself included) should not be overruled.

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