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Introduction to Special Feature

“Olaudah Equiano:
African or American?”

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SPECIAL FEATURE INTRODUCTION

OLAUDAH EQUIANO African or American?

Brycchan Carey

The Interesting Narrative of the Life of Olaudah Equiano, or Gustavus Vassa, the African, published in 1789, is one of a very few texts written in English by a person of African birth (or descent) during the eighteenth century. It is also one of the first accounts of a journey up from slavery written by one who had personally experienced enslavement. This, as has been frequently observed, makes it one of the earliest slave narratives: indeed, it is often cited as the original text of the genre. But *The Interesting Narrative* is not only an account of what it was like to be enslaved. It is also by turns a voyage narrative, a conversion narrative, an economic treatise, and an abolitionist tract. More famously, in passages that are now routinely quoted in dozens of anthologies and textbooks on both sides of the modern Atlantic Ocean, the book contains a long, detailed, and celebrated account of life in an African village—among the earliest such descriptions in the English language—as well as an equally celebrated first-person account of the Middle Passage: the journey from Africa to America in a slave ship. These were all important parts of a book that appeared in 1789; the year

in which the British parliament first seriously debated abolishing the slave trade—and, indeed, we can see *The Interesting Narrative* as a central document of that debate. Yet they remain significant to this day. The descriptions of African society are the most important written by an African in the days before the European empires of the nineteenth century severely disrupted traditional African societies, while the descriptions of the Middle Passage are a vivid reminder of the sufferings of the ancestors of most African American and Black British people alive today: an act of memory that serves as a point of connection between Africa and the many lands of the African Diaspora. *The Interesting Narrative* is indeed an important book, and its author a reminder and a representative of the millions of people whose lives were affected by the Atlantic slave trade.

From the outset, the author of *The Interesting Narrative* represented himself as having a complex identity that encompassed different ideas of status, of nationhood, and of self. A contemporary advertisement for the book promises the reader that the work, “neatly printed on a good paper,” contains “an elegant frontispiece of the Author’s Portrait.”¹ And so it does: the picture, painted by William Denton and engraved by Daniel Orme, depicts a middle-aged African man dressed in fashionable clothes and holding an open book in his right hand. On closer inspection, the book is revealed to be a Bible, open to the Acts of the Apostles 4:12: “neither is there salvation in any other: for there is none other name under heaven given among men, whereby we must be saved.” In the biblical story from which the verse is taken, Peter lays hands upon a lame man and, with the command “in the name of Jesus Christ of Nazareth rise up and walk,” cures him on the spot. The miracle generates a large and curious crowd to whom Peter preaches an energetic sermon. Taken into custody overnight by the authorities, Peter is the next day asked by what authority he performed the miracle. His answer is simple and direct: the miraculous healing was performed “by the name of Jesus Christ of Nazareth...neither is there salvation in any other: for there is none other name under heaven given among men, whereby we must be saved.”

With over 31,000 biblical verses to choose from, the author of *The Interesting Narrative* no doubt selected this one with care. It is significant,

¹ *The Morning Star*, 1 May 1789.

therefore, that he chose a verse that attests to the power of identity and the importance of naming. It is the name of Jesus Christ that cures the lame man, and it is in the name of Jesus Christ that salvation can be found. Naming, the author of *The Interesting Narrative* seems to be telling us, is at the center of both spiritual and temporal power since it is by invoking a name that a broken body can be healed, or a sinning soul be eternally redeemed. The name, Peter makes clear, is that of Jesus Christ of Nazareth. No other name is important. Yet the author of *The Interesting Narrative* himself undercuts Peter's assertion with the epigram on his title page, from Isaiah 12: 2–4: "Behold, God is my salvation; I will trust and not be afraid, for the Lord Jehovah is my strength and my song; he also is become my salvation.... And in that day shall ye say, Praise the Lord, call upon his name, declare his doings among the people."² By quoting from Acts in the frontispiece and from Isaiah on the title page, the author invokes the power of naming twice over, but also reminds the reader that the greatest authority in the universe exists within a paradoxical trinity of multiple names and identities; a "three-person'd God" known collectively and separately as the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit.³

In this context, we embark upon reading a book written by a man who claims two names on the title page alone and, as the diligent reader who goes beyond the title page will discover, has had other names imposed upon him at other times.⁴ Indeed, as Vincent Carretta has established beyond any reasonable doubt, "Oludah Equiano" is a name that the author used rarely if at all before the publication of his autobiography in May 1789. Until that point, and beyond it, letters and documents show that he habitually went by the name of "Gustavus Vassa"; the name foisted upon him by the naval officer Michael Pascal who owned the boy slave before selling him to the Montserratian Quaker Robert King in 1773.⁵ Pascal's choice of name demonstrates a good knowledge of history and cruel sense of irony. The original Gustavus Vassa was a sixteenth-century Swedish nobleman who had led

² Oludah Equiano, *The Interesting Narrative and Other Writings*, edited with an introduction and notes by Vincent Carretta, 2nd ed. (London and New York: Penguin, 2003).

³ John Donne, Holy Sonnet 14, "Batter my heart, three-person'd God."

⁴ For example, he tells us that "in [Virginia] I was called Jacob; but on board the African snow I was called Michael." Equiano, *Interesting Narrative*, 63.

⁵ Vincent Carretta, "Oludah Equiano or Gustavus Vassa? New Light on an Eighteenth-Century Question of Identity," *Slavery and Abolition*, 20, 3 (December 1999), 96–105, 103–4.

the Swedish people into a war of independence from the Danes and as a result had become the first Swedish king of the Swedish people. He could thus be seen as the man who had led the Swedes out of a sort of slavery. Pascal's act of naming was typical of slave owners. By taking away the identity of the slave, the owner was able to demonstrate the total control he had over his possession. By the same token, thirty years later, Gustavus Vassa could reassert his own identity by naming—or renaming—himself “Olaudah Equiano.” Since this is the name by which he appears to have wanted posterity to remember him, in this essay, I refer to the author of *The Interesting Narrative* as Olaudah Equiano.

Vincent Carretta's short essay “Olaudah Equiano or Gustavus Vassa? New Light on an Eighteenth-century Question of Identity,” published in the journal *Slavery and Abolition* in December 1999, foregrounded this act of naming and renaming in its title. According to Carretta, the name Olaudah Equiano “must have come as a revelation to friend and foe alike.”⁶ Perhaps unexpectedly to its author, however, the revelation that Equiano reclaimed an African name when publishing his autobiography was not destined to be the most surprising nor the most controversial aspect of Carretta's essay. Instead, critics and historians reacted with surprise to the revelation that two pieces of hitherto largely unnoticed archival evidence suggested that Equiano had been born not in the West Africa of *The Interesting Narrative*, but, instead, in the British American colony of South Carolina. At face value, the documents seemed unambiguous: on two occasions, separated by a period of fourteen years, a birthplace of Carolina or South Carolina had been entered against the name of Gustavus Vassa. At face value, it seemed that a truth had been revealed: Olaudah Equiano of the Igbo was, in fact, Gustavus Vassa of South Carolina. A literary fraud had been perpetrated. Equiano was not what he claimed to be.⁷ For those

⁶ Carretta, “Olaudah Equiano,” 104.

⁷ Carretta was not the first to question Equiano's African identity. S. E. Ogude argued in 1982 that “Equiano's narrative is to a large extent fictional.” While it is an important text written by a person of African descent, it is nevertheless “an imaginative reorganization of a wide variety of tales about Africa from an equally wide range of sources.” See S. E. Ogude, “Facts into Fiction: Equiano's Narrative Reconsidered,” *Research in African Literatures*, 13 (Spring 1982), 31–43. In a paper titled “Equiano and the Identity Debate” given at the conference *Olaudah Equiano: Representation and Reality* at Kingston University, London, on 22 March 2003, Ogude publicly reversed his position, arguing that Equiano demonstrated typical Igbo characteristics and for that reason it could be assumed that he was a native of West Africa. For a review of

for whom Equiano's story provided a point of connection between the old world and the new; for those for whom Equiano's narrative was a powerful testimony to the horrors of slavery, and for those for whom Equiano's life provided an example of triumph in the face of adversity, this was both a startling and an unsettling possibility.

In fact, Carretta had revealed this information before. Nevertheless, until he foregrounded the identity question in his *Slavery and Abolition* article, scholars seemed not to have grasped the implications of his archival researches while Carretta himself seemed hesitant to raise the possibility of Equiano's having been born in America. In his 1995 Penguin edition of *The Interesting Narrative*, Carretta had already published details of all the relevant archives. A brief footnote to Equiano's account of his baptism in St Margaret's Church, Westminster in 1759 records that "the entry in the parish register for 9 February reads 'Gustavus Vassa a Black born in Carolina 12 years old.'" ⁸ A more substantial note discusses Equiano's participation in Constantine Phipp's Arctic expedition of 1773, and records that a "Gustavus Weston ... joined the expedition on 17 May and is identified as being an able seaman, aged 28, born in South Carolina."⁹ These two archival records are at the center of the identity debate. In 1995, however, Carretta seemed unwilling to draw attention to documents that offered a competing biography, and the possibility of an American nativity is not raised in his introduction. Three years later, in 1998, Carretta clearly felt that the question of Equiano's identity and birthplace merited greater emphasis than he had originally accorded it, or he may have been surprised that the implications of his careful archival research had been overlooked by other scholars. In either case, he decided to draw attention to the possible implications of his discoveries, and thereby to initiate what we might now call "the identity debate." In an article in the journal *Research in African Literatures*, he argued that "some of the archival research for the Penguin edition raises the tantalizing possibility that Equiano's African identity may have been a rhetorical invention,"

the conference, see Mark Stein, "'Olaudah Equiano: Representation and Reality': An International One-Day Conference," *Early American Literature*, 38: 3 (2003), 543–45.

⁸ *The Interesting Narrative and Other Writings*, edited with an introduction and notes by Vincent Carretta (London and New York: Penguin, 1995), 261n197.

⁹ Carretta, *Interesting Narrative*, 286n485.

although, at this point, he is hopeful that “Equiano’s true identity... may be established with certainty in the future.”¹⁰

Scholarly reaction to this article was muted, perhaps because the journal *Research in African Literatures* does not enjoy as wide a readership as it deserves, or perhaps because Carretta’s assertions were compressed into two short paragraphs at the end of the article. In the following year, however, Carretta chose to develop his arguments more strongly in an article in the historical journal *Slavery and Abolition*. In this article, as we have seen, Carretta put the question of identity at the center of his argument in a way that few scholars in the field could ignore. Given the importance of his assertions, however, Carretta’s assessment was surprisingly measured. Although he concluded that “there can be no doubt that Vassa manipulated some of the facts in his autobiography” he nonetheless conceded that “the evidence regarding his place and date of birth is clearly contradictory and will probably remain tantalizingly so.”¹¹ As Carretta himself recognizes, and as I and the other four contributors to this edition of *1650–1850* show, the evidence about Equiano’s birthplace is a great deal more ambiguous than it at first appears. Yet ambiguity should not be confused with insignificance. Carretta’s archival researches and, just as significantly, the conclusions he drew from them, struck at the heart of our understanding of Equiano’s text and challenged not only Equiano himself, but also the critical and historical models and assumptions that underpinned much recent scholarly work into the history and culture of what Paul Gilroy has called “The Black Atlantic.”¹²

In 2005, Carretta reached out over the heads of critics and historians with a biography of Equiano that addressed general readers as well as specialists, but which did not offer a final resolution of the mystery. Although one imagines that he searched very diligently for it, in *Equiano, the African: Biography of a Self-Made Man*, Carretta was not able to present any new evidence on the birthplace question. Instead, he develops his thinking, extrapolates from what he has already discovered, and reaches a conclusion. “Reasonable doubt,” he writes, “inclines me to believe that Equiano’s accounts of Africa and the Middle Passage

¹⁰ Vincent Carretta, “Three West Indian Writers of the 1780s Revisited and Revised,” *Research in African Literatures*, 29, 4 (Winter 1998): 73–86, 85.

¹¹ Carretta, “Olaudah Equiano or Gustavus Vassa?,” 103.

¹² Paul Gilroy, *The Black Atlantic: Modernity and Double Consciousness* (London: Verso, 1993).

were imaginary rather than real.” Although the language is tentative, Carretta had by this point clearly satisfied himself that Equiano’s birthplace was South Carolina, or at least not West Africa. Even then, he keeps the door open to alternatives, noting that “we must keep in mind that reasonable doubt is not the same as conclusive proof. We will probably never know the truth about Equiano’s birth and upbringing.”¹³ At the time of writing, this situation remains unchanged.

Carretta’s biography of Equiano was in general very well received, and he has established an unassailable position as the foremost authority on Equiano’s life and writings. Nevertheless, by questioning Equiano’s birthplace, Carretta was stepping onto thorny ground. Eighteenth-century proslavery campaigners seeking to discredit Equiano had already made accusations about the information Equiano had offered the public concerning his birthplace. As Carretta and others have noted, in April 1792, two London newspapers alleged that Equiano had never stepped foot on the continent of Africa but “was born and bred up in the Danish Island of Santa Cruz, in the West Indies.”¹⁴ Clearly, this was a spurious accusation made with the express purpose of undermining Equiano’s authority to speak against the slave trade, and, by extension, with the purpose of undermining the abolition movement more broadly. Nevertheless, although the accusation was made with a very specific and local political purpose in mind, the accusation of 1792 would inevitably influence the reception of similar ideas made at any time in the future, and for any purpose, whether for the morally indefensible purpose of defending the slave trade, or, by contrast, for the laudable purpose of genuinely advancing the boundaries of knowledge. Thus, whether backed up by documentary evidence or not, the assertion that Equiano was not a native of Africa could only be made in later years at considerable moral and ideological risk. In the past, a politically motivated group of people had, by questioning the location of Equiano’s birth, sought to undermine both Equiano’s character and the abolitionist campaign of which he was part. In the present, it might be argued, revelations about Equiano’s birthplace that contradicted Equiano’s own account might be used by those seeking to discredit not just Equiano but all those engaged in overthrowing the many forms of racism that remain

¹³ Vincent Carretta, *Equiano, the African: Biography of a Self-Made Man* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2005), 320.

¹⁴ See Carretta, “Olaudah Equiano or Gustavus Vassa?” 97–98.

prevalent in the modern world. Of course, this remains a possibility. Were it to be established beyond doubt that Equiano's African identity was a "rhetorical invention," those who wished to discredit Equiano would be free to use that information to do so. But we should remind ourselves that this does not mean that the scholars, Carretta included, engaged in seeking the truth about Equiano's origins are motivated by the desire to "discredit" Equiano. Indeed, the opposite is usually the case. Nor does it mean that Equiano's achievements are any the less important, or that the antislavery cause for which he campaigned is any less significant. Whether born free in Africa or enslaved in America, Equiano reached adulthood as a slave, emancipated himself by his own efforts, and produced a key text in the campaign that was to lead to the end of the Atlantic slave trade and, ultimately, to the end of slavery in the Atlantic world.

* The Identity Debate *

In the last few years, as Carretta's findings have sunk in, historians have begun to incorporate statements of doubt into their discussions of Equiano's origins, while literary critics have started to emphasize the rhetorical and intertextual complexity of his writing. It is too early to say whether a consensus might emerge, but the signs are that most critics and historians, like Carretta himself, accept that the truth will most likely never be known and that the best that can be done is to incline to one side of the argument or the other, based on the balance of probabilities as they see them. Intriguingly, however, while few scholars other than Carretta himself have inclined strongly toward an American nativity, several have been resolute in defending Equiano's African origins. Defenders of Equiano's African nativity have recently found a figurehead in Paul Lovejoy, whose arguments can be found in articles in *Slavery and Abolition* and *Historically Speaking: the Bulletin of the [American] Historical Society*, in both cases in dialogue with Carretta himself.¹⁵ The

¹⁵ Paul E. Lovejoy, "Autobiography and Memory: Gustavus Vassa, alias Olaudah Equiano, the African," *Slavery and Abolition* 27:3 (December 2006), 317–47. Carretta replied to Lovejoy, and Lovejoy responded to Carretta's reply. See: Vincent Carretta, "Response to Paul Lovejoy's 'Autobiography and Memory: Gustavus Vassa, alias Olaudah Equiano, the African,'" *Slavery and Abolition*, 28:1 (April 2007), 115–19, and Paul E. Lovejoy, "Issues of Motiva-

Carretta-Lovejoy exchanges are showing signs of descending into acrimony, but are still extremely useful indicators (and drivers) of the ways in which the debate is unfolding. While there is much discussion of dates of shipping and other such details, the core positions are as follows. Carretta argues that Equiano had no reason to misrepresent himself or conceal an African birth when he gave his birthplace as South Carolina. It follows, therefore, that Equiano spoke truthfully when he told a baptismal clerk and later a ship's purser that he was born in Carolina.¹⁶ Lovejoy's central position is that "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."¹⁷ Both positions are, ultimately, based on faith rather than evidence. We cannot know either Equiano's circumstances or state of mind when he identified himself as having been born in Carolina. Although the most plausible explanation is that he said he was born in Carolina because he was born in Carolina, history is replete with examples of the implausible—and sometimes the seemingly impossible—turning out to be the truth. On the other hand, Lovejoy ducks the rather obvious point that Equiano knew many other Africans, and thus did not need to rely on his memory alone for details of Igbo language, geography, and culture. Indeed, had he decided to construct an Igbo identity, it is inconceivable that Equiano would not have researched the language and culture of the group he claimed to belong to by asking other Igbo people for information.

It would, of course, be possible to conduct a line-by-line analysis of the Carretta-Lovejoy exchanges, and this exercise might reveal much. In the following paragraphs, however, I want to temporarily step away from the minutiae of that debate and reflect directly on the evidence itself. The context for this decision is as follows. In June 2000, at a time when there was very little reliable information about Equiano on the Internet, I added a few pages about his life and work to my personal

tion—Vassa/Equiano and Carretta's Critique of the Evidence," *Slavery and Abolition*, 28:1 (April 2007), 121–25. The debate was continued, this time with the addition of essays by several other scholars, in "Oludah Equiano, The South Carolinian? A Forum," in *Historically Speaking: The Bulletin of the [American] Historical Society*, 7:3 (January–February 2006).

¹⁶ Carretta, "Response to Paul Lovejoy," 117.

¹⁷ Lovejoy, "Autobiography and Memory," 325.

website.¹⁸ These webpages—which are still regularly expanded and enhanced—soon became popular with students, scholars, and general readers. In 2003, after receiving a large number of emails from readers concerned because they had heard that “Equiano has been discredited,” I added a page outlining the main issues and offering arguments both for and against the proposition that Equiano had been born in South Carolina.¹⁹ The webpage offers the competing arguments in columns; here I take a more conventional approach; nevertheless, my intention in the following paragraphs is to draw upon the arguments I have developed and am continuing to further develop online, and to put both sides of the case as plainly as is consistent with such a complex and contested topic. To simplify the arguments, I do not intend here to make direct page-by-page reference either to the growing body of critical and historical writing that argues the case, or to chapter and verse of *The Interesting Narrative*. Instead, I shall create a simplified synthesis of the arguments of many critics and historians on both sides of the debate, including my own views, in the hope that balance and clarity will help the debate move forwards in a fruitful manner. To do this, I have divided the issues into five broad categories. Clearly, these are somewhat synthetic and do overlap to a certain extent. Nevertheless, I do hope to have raised the most important areas in a way that clarifies rather than obscures the questions at the heart of the debate. My five categories are 1. Written Evidence, 2. Circumstantial Evidence, 3. Context and Motivation, 4. Contemporary Expectations About the Text, and 5. Textual Analysis, and I name the opposing sides in the debate “Africanists” and “Americanists.”

* Written Evidence *

The most compelling single piece of evidence in the case is, of course, Equiano’s own autobiography, *The Interesting Narrative*, which unambiguously tells us that Equiano was born in Africa. The origin of this information is Equiano himself. The next two important documents are

¹⁸ Brycchan Carey, “Olaudah Equiano, or, Gustavus Vassa, the African.” Online at: <http://www.brycchancarey.com/equiano/>

¹⁹ Brycchan Carey, “Where was Equiano Born? (And why does it matter).” Online at: <http://www.brycchancarey.com/equiano/nativity.htm>

a baptismal record, dated 9 February 1759, in which it is recorded that "Gustavus Vassa a Black born in Carolina" was baptized in St. Margaret's Church, Westminster, and a ship's muster roll, dated 17 May 1773, in which it is recorded that "Gustavus Weston" born in "South Carolina" had embarked as an able seaman on board the *Racehorse*, a ship on a voyage of discovery towards the North Pole.

Americanists (in this essay, those who argue that Equiano was born in America) point out that the information given in the baptismal and naval records could only have come from Equiano himself since, whether born in Africa or America, no independent record would have been kept of his birth. They argue that at those points in his life, Equiano had no motive to misrepresent himself, and thus the information is likely to be reliable. Africanists (in this essay, those who argue that Equiano was born in Africa) argue that if Equiano's English was poor in 1759, then erroneous information might have been supplied on his behalf. Some Americanists concede this point, but argue that this does not explain why Equiano gave his birthplace as South Carolina in 1773, when he was an adult in control of his actions and with a good command of English.

In all cases, therefore, the documentary evidence is inconclusive and uncorroborated. The only certain thing we can say is that at one point in his life, Equiano was in the habit of saying that he was born in South Carolina, while at another point he was in the habit of saying that he was born in West Africa. It is clear that he misrepresented himself at certain stages of his life. The question remains: which stages?

* Circumstantial Evidence *

Without direct documentary evidence for either an African or an American nativity, historians might turn to circumstantial evidence to come to a decision based not on facts established "beyond all reasonable doubt" but rather those that would establish a scenario based "on the balance of probabilities." There are two ways to approach this. First, by corroborating those details of *The Interesting Narrative* that can be verified, we can build up a picture of the sort of autobiographer Equiano was: whether his narrative is by and large accurate, and whether the movements of his early life seem more consistent with an African or an American nativity. Second, we can compare Equiano's representa-

tion of Igbo language, geography, and culture with other accounts from the period or shortly after to see if they are consistent.

Americanists can point to a number of circumstantial details in Equiano's narrative that suggest that Equiano manipulated the facts of his early life. In the first place, they argue, Equiano gets the dates wrong about the ships in which he was brought from America to England, which would be consistent with him having made the story up. This is particularly striking when we consider that Equiano's account of his life is usually very accurate when it can be checked against independent sources, making it surprising that his account of his first ten years can be shown to be partially inaccurate. It is also significant, Americanists argue, that Equiano never used the name "Equiano" until shortly before publishing his autobiography while all his friends and acquaintances knew him by the name "Gustavus Vassa." The name "Olaudah Equiano," they argue, might well have been invented as part of the careful construction of an African persona that he carried out in 1789.

By contrast, Africanists read the same circumstantial details rather differently. For instance, although Equiano does get the dates wrong about the ships in which he was brought from America to England, this can be explained by the fact that he was a very young child at the time, and suffering a severe trauma as a result of being kidnapped and sold into slavery, so it is reasonable to assume that his memory might sometimes be at fault. Indeed, Equiano's account of his life is usually very accurate when it can be checked against independent sources, showing that it was his usual practice to tell the truth as far as he could remember it. It is unusual indeed for an autobiographer to misrepresent only a small portion of their lives: most autobiographers are very consistent in the way they represent themselves. And the fact that Equiano seems never to have used his birth name before 1789 makes little difference to question of where he was born. In the eighteenth century, few slaves or former slaves used their African names in everyday life. Equiano's friend Quobna Ottobah Cugoano, for example, used his slave name of John Stuart throughout his life, except on the title page of his book, which was published in 1787.²⁰

The information Equiano's offers about his childhood in Igboland has also come under scrutiny. Africanists argue that his knowledge of

²⁰ Quobna Ottobah Cugoano, *Thoughts and Sentiments on the Evil of Slavery and Other Writings*, ed. Vincent Carretta (London and New York: Penguin, 1999).

Igbo language and culture is such that he must have experienced it at firsthand. They concede that Equiano clearly made use of published accounts of West Africa when preparing *The Interesting Narrative*, but they also point out that there is much information that could not be found in contemporary books. Americanists, by contrast, think that the few details in the African sequences that could not be found in published accounts are vague and generalized and could easily have been supplied by Equiano's African friends and acquaintances. We should remember that there were thousands of people of African birth or descent living in London in the 1780s, and there is no reason why Equiano could not have simply asked one of them for some information on the African interior.

* Context and Motivation *

The Interesting Narrative was written as an intervention in the most important political debate of its age: the debate over abolition of the Atlantic slave trade. Indeed, the book itself was published in early May 1789, just a few days before an important debate on the topic took place in the House of Commons. The debate, on 12 May, was marked by a speech delivered by William Wilberforce that was acclaimed both for its eloquence and for the widespread belief that with it, the "death knell" had been sounded for the Atlantic slave trade.²¹ In the preceding weeks and days, newspapers were full of vigorous debate and extensive comment on the subject of abolition, and many books and pamphlets were published, of which Equiano's was just one.

Americanists might argue that, since Equiano's main motivation was to end the slave trade, so he would write or say anything in his published work that he thought he could get away with, as long as it brought the abolition of the slave trade closer. Since the campaign of the 1780s focused on abolishing not slavery but the slave trade, so too must Equiano's book have focused on the effect the slave trade had on Africa and on its African victims. Put simply, without the African passages, Equiano's book could not have played a major role in the

²¹ For an analysis of the speech, see Brycchan Carey, *British Abolitionism and the Rhetoric of Sensibility: Writing, Sentiment, and Slavery, 1760–1807* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005), 156–73.

abolition debates of 1789. Though born in America, Equiano created an African identity for the calculated but entirely laudable purpose of hastening the end of the slave trade.

By contrast, Africanists could point out that, since Equiano's main motivation was to end the slave trade, so he would be very careful to tell the truth in his published work and not write or say anything that might bring him or his campaign into disrepute. Equiano must surely have known that the most intensive search would be made to discredit his work and, through it, the abolition movement. To invent a childhood that could at any time be publicly revealed as a fraud would be such a potentially damaging maneuver that Equiano, who was clearly deeply committed to the cause, would not have risked it. Under such circumstances, Equiano's account of his African origins must surely be reliable.

As we have seen, the question of Equiano's motivation can also be raised in relation to the documents giving his birthplace as South Carolina. While the information on the baptismal record might not have come from Equiano (although it is likely that it did) the information given to the purser of the *Racehorse* certainly did come directly from Equiano himself. This begs the question why, when nothing in particular was at stake, he would have given officials an incorrect birthplace. Indeed, Americanists would argue that, since Equiano had nothing to hide in his early life, so he must have told the truth about his birthplace to the church clerk at his baptism and to the naval officer who compiled the muster roll in which he gave his birthplace as South Carolina. Yet Africanists could well point out that Equiano had been abducted and enslaved as a child. Having suffered a severe trauma, he might have had any combination of either rational or irrational reasons for wishing to conceal his true identity. Having been by any definition imaginable a victim of child abuse, the young Equiano might have invented any story to help him manage his trauma, including a spurious birthplace in South Carolina. By the same token, and as is often the case with child abuse victims, he may have come to terms with his trauma in middle age, and decided, perhaps as part of his own recovery, finally to reveal his true origins in West Africa.

* **Contemporary Expectations about the Text** *

Readers in different ages have different expectations of the texts they read. For example, twenty-first-century readers find the detail and the length of much eighteenth-century writing daunting and off-putting. In another example, eighteenth-century readers, unable to compare facts and representations against other media such as television or the Internet, might arguably have been more willing to accept reports in books, pamphlets, and newspapers at face value. But this is only arguable. Scholars on all sides of the identity debate would agree that readers in the eighteenth century were not fools, and demanded the same high level of honesty and veracity that we would now expect. Nevertheless, it is undeniable that Equiano would have known that it would be very difficult for his readers to check the truth, or otherwise, of his account. This, Americanists might argue, makes it more likely that Equiano could have invented an African childhood and more likely, once that childhood had been presented to the public, that it would be accepted as fact. And yet “difficult” is not the same as “impossible.” Eighteenth-century readers did have access to records, and, by mail or by personal contact, were able to consult individuals with appropriate memories, albeit not at the speed that modern readers have come to expect. Indeed, as the historian Alan Taylor has argued, the Atlantic was “less of a barrier and more of a bridge” in the eighteenth century, and this was true even after the American Revolution.²² Despite the recent war, links between England and America were still close. Had Equiano been lying, sooner or later someone in America or the Caribbean would have detected his falsehood, particularly after his book was published in New York in 1791. Thus, Africanists argue that Equiano would not have tried to get away with telling a lie about his African origins because somebody, somewhere, would have known the truth and that truth would eventually have been revealed, even if only after many years.

Another question arising from our attempts to understand contemporary expectations of the text concerns the question of the form of much abolitionist literature. Equiano’s autobiography, although not the first account of a life in slavery, has been seen as the first major slave narrative and an important influence on the development of the

²² Alan Taylor, *American Colonies: The Settling of North America* (New York: Penguin, 2002), 302.

form. Nineteenth-century readers were familiar with this form and thus approached slave narratives with preconceived expectations. Eighteenth-century readers approached Equiano's narrative without these preconceptions, and thus read it in the context of a more general literature of abolition. That literature contained factual books, tracts, and pamphlets but even more so it was made up of poems, plays, and novels. Readers were thus used to hearing general truths about slavery and the slave trade embedded within fictional narratives rather than particular and verifiable histories, and so it is arguable that they wouldn't have cared very much about whether the details of Equiano's story contained a particularized truth when the book clearly dramatized what was in general true for many slaves. Africanist Scholars, on the other hand, would counter that, in the first place, Equiano would have known that, to be taken seriously, he had to appear as more than just a writer of fiction, but as someone who was telling the whole truth. Indeed, it is the personal testimony that book contains that gives it its force. Equiano deliberately challenged his reader's expectations and that thus the rhetorical force of the book depends on it being not fiction but verifiable fact, personally experienced.

* Textual Analysis *

The Interesting Narrative, like any text, is amenable to analysis and literary scholars are able to make judgments concerning the veracity of the text based on their close readings of either the book as a whole, or key passages within it. Most modern scholars are unlikely to closely read the text without reference to both the historical and cultural contexts within which it was produced. Scholars may look at the style and structure of the book but, equally, they may compare it with other books that described Africa or the middle passage. While textual analysis might not provide scholars with a final or indisputable answer to the whereabouts of Equiano's birthplace, in the absence of further documentary evidence, close and careful reading probably provides the most fruitful arena for further investigation into the question.

Textual analysis might begin with a consideration of the author's style, and critics might be interested in whether the book's style is internally consistent, or consistent with similar texts by other authors. Americanist critics might argue that the parts of *The Interesting Narrative*

that describe Africa and the middle passage have a mythological style that makes them unreliable. Equiano gives many facts which could have been gleaned from reading, or from conversations with other Africans he knew, but he gives few personal details. For example, although he mentions a mother, a father, an uncle, a brother, and a sister, he does not supply names for any of these close relatives. Overall, his descriptions of Africa paint a picture that is both too generalized and too idyllic to be taken seriously as history and that thus the depictions of Africa are probably drawn from the imagination. On the other hand, Africanist critics might argue that the very fact that the image of Africa is idyllic suggests that Equiano is recalling a genuine and genuinely happy childhood. Moreover, these critics might argue, the descriptions of African village life contain a wealth of local cultural and geographical detail, and this attention to detail is consistent with the rest of Equiano's narrative. Indeed, the parts of *The Interesting Narrative* that describe Africa and the middle passage are good examples of clear reportage that deserve to be taken as seriously as the parts of the book that can be externally verified.

Critics do not focus only on the internal consistencies of the book, but also on its relationship with other texts. Americanists point out that much of the early part of *The Interesting Narrative* closely resembles similar accounts made by European or American authors, for example, by Anthony Benezet. This is evidence, they would argue, that Equiano probably invented his African childhood, and copied information out of books such as these in order to replicate the detailed style of the later parts of his book. Africanist critics agree that parts of the book resemble the writing of Benezet and others, but point out that Equiano references many of these works, and consulted them in order to help him remember the details of a distant childhood. It is not unusual for autobiographers, they argue, to consult both their own notes and diaries, as well as the writing of others, in order to reconstruct distant and perhaps hazy memories. In this, Equiano is doing no differently than any other autobiographer.

* Taking the Debate Forward *

The arguments above are by no means the end of the story. Rather, they are a summary only of the most frequently made points on either side

of the debate. While this extended introductory essay has aimed to set out the history and principle terms of what is becoming known to scholars as “the identity debate,” the four essays that follow it attempt, in various ways, to consider the contradictory and inconclusive evidence that remains, and to new suggest approaches to this contested autobiography that remain alert to its inconsistencies and ambiguities, but which offer the literary critic productive routes through which to read, assess, and teach the text. The authors reach no certain conclusions about the location of Equiano’s birthplace, nor do they attempt to speak for Equiano on the thoughts and motivations that prompted him to take up his pen in 1789. They do, however, speculate on the cultural, material, and personal circumstances of the text’s production, and they do suggest a range of scenarios that may have resulted in Equiano misrepresenting himself—whether as a child in a draughty church or alternatively as an adult at his writing desk. Throughout, the essays emphasize *The Interesting Narrative*’s status as text—as a rhetorical or literary exercise rather than as a dry collection of historical facts—and they remain alert to the peculiar idiosyncrasies of the autobiographical form, a form that is notorious for both conscious and unconscious self-misrepresentation.

By looking at the ways in which *The Interesting Narrative* negotiates ideas of culture, Sarah Brophy asks new questions about the relationship between identity and culture. In particular, she argues that even if the text does not present a coherent or verifiable set of details about the author’s life, it can still be considered as a significant account of the unstable processes of identity and authority for displaced subjects in the context of the slave trade. Working from Françoise Lionnet’s understanding of autoethnography as the self-reflexive writing of the story of a self-in-culture, she explores how the narrative testifies to the contradictory subjective experiences it generated for displaced and racialized people. Indeed, Equiano is repeatedly compelled to extend his discussion beyond the realms of economics and literacy and to engage with the notion of “culture” itself. Ultimately, Equiano both does and does not see the limitations of hinging his self-definition as a Christian, literate, British subject on his claim to exemplify *Homo economicus*. An examination of *The Interesting Narrative* through the lens of the idea of culture thus opens up a conversation about the shifting dimensions and uses of ideas of cultivation, commerce, self-development, and abolition in the late eighteenth century. Brophy concludes that “if we pay more

attention to the narrative's self-implication in these contentious matters, then we may be chastened in our quest to establish, test, and re-test the identity of *The Interesting Narrative's* author and more attentive to the narrative's complex critique of culture at the moment of its emergence."

Angelo Costanzo directly addresses the key questions that emerge from Carretta's thesis, focusing on the question of authenticity, to argue that Equiano honestly believed in his African origins. He begins by examining the issue of Equiano's reliance on other writers' works. As Costanzo notes, it is evident that Equiano borrowed heavily from contemporary abolitionist accounts since he has cited many of them as sources in his narrative. But, he asks, are these "clues" merely a ploy used by Equiano to deliberately deceive his reader? By exploring the consequences of such a claim Costanzo concludes that there is no logical, financial, or ethical reason that could explain why Equiano would risk having his *Narrative* declared "a hoax." Aware of the anxiety that the doubt over Equiano's African origins has caused, in the final section of the essay Costanzo entertains the possibility that Equiano's African account may either be a bold fabrication or an honest mistake. By contrasting *The Interesting Narrative* with a range of other personal writings, including Benjamin Franklin's celebrated (and famously problematic) autobiography, as well as with recent studies on the role of memory in the writing of autobiography, Costanzo concludes that, whatever the truth may be, "any sensational revelations about his important narrative should be strictly examined and not be declared proven fact until they are absolutely verified."

Tara Czechowski's essay explores the complex relationship between eighteenth-century concepts of sensibility, pathology, and the African black body. In the eighteenth century, she argues, physicians and philosophers tended to pathologize the African body as insensible and therefore immune to "the physical, intellectual and spiritual pain felt by Europeans." This denial of sensibility "not only prevented the possibility of European sympathy with the enslaved, but also provided a justification for slavery in the West Indies." In her essay, Czechowski proposes that Equiano uses *The Interesting Narrative* to challenge this preconception of the African black body as insensible, showing that Equiano's attempt to make the British reader aware of the sensibility of the African subsequently alters how one should conceive of Equiano's *Narrative*. Rather than reading Equiano's *Narrative* as a text that attempts to record the authentic experience of an "historical man," Czechowski

suggests that one should consider the extent to which it “not only made visible the sufferings of one man, but also revealed a collective history of authentic pain that could not be seen because of a systematic denial of its possibility.”

Finally, Shaun Regan both broadens and complicates the concern with the relationship between fact and fiction in *The Interesting Narrative*, via a close, historicized examination of Equiano’s narrative art. In the work itself, Equiano posits a correspondence between his plain style of writing, and a native people whose culture is “simple,” whose “manner of living” is “entirely plain,” and whose buildings “lack ornament.” In Equiano’s own terms, then, the verbal manner of his personal history corresponds to the simplicity and purity that he attributes to his Igbo ancestors. For all his authorial disavowal of verbal embellishment, however, Equiano’s autobiography is in fact a highly crafted, rhetorically sophisticated work, which needs to be read in relation to a number of prose forms that he would have encountered in Britain and the Americas. For example, his portrayal of Igbo communities, Regan notes, is itself “adorned” by the “colouring of imagination,” drawing as it does upon imagery and analogies taken from his later life and reading. Without suggesting either that parts of the work were *not* autobiographical or *merely* fictive, therefore, in this essay Regan reads the *Narrative* as verbal discourse that was carefully fashioned by its author, and that both drew upon, and adapted, available means of verbal representation: narrative techniques, modes of writing and generic conventions that, to borrow Equiano’s loaded expression, “coloured” its depiction of his personal history.

Taken together, these five essays offer, we hope, useful engagements with the Identity Debate for both scholars and students. The essays may not pinpoint Equiano’s birthplace on a map, but they do testify to the continuing importance and complexity of *The Interesting Narrative* and its author.