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# Olaudah Equiano or Gustavus Vassa? New Light on an Eighteenth-Century Question of Identity

VINCENT CARRETTA

I stress the question mark after the name Vassa in the title of my essay to raise the issue of identity in *The Interesting Narrative of the Life of Olaudah Equiano, or Gustavus Vassa, The African. Written by Himself*, first published in London in March 1789.<sup>1</sup> The author's work, quickly and widely reviewed, immediately became a bestseller: a second edition appeared in 1789, and a ninth, the last published in the binomial author's lifetime, in 1794. Selling his book primarily by subscription, which required buyers to pay half the price of the book in advance, the binomial author controlled the means of production and distribution of his book, and thus his public identity. During the author's lifetime, the newspapers *The Oracle* and *The Star* raised what I call the Equiano question: was Olaudah Equiano an identity *revealed*, as the title of the autobiography implies, or an identity *assumed* by Gustavus Vassa in 1789 for rhetorical (and financial) ends? The Equiano question has been further complicated by the recent discovery of more biographical information about the life of Olaudah Equiano or Gustavus Vassa, which suggests that the author of *The Interesting Narrative* may have been a native of South Carolina rather than Africa.<sup>2</sup> And this new information enables us to correct the chronology of the author's early years in slavery.

In the first known published review of *The Interesting Narrative*, Mary Wollstonecraft noted the significance of the author's nationality. Her comments in the May 1789 issue of *The Analytical Review* opened with the observation that

The life of an African, written by himself, is certainly a curiosity, as it has been a favourite philosophic whim to degrade the numerous nations, on whom the sun-beams more directly dart, below the common level of humanity, and hastily to conclude that nature, by

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making them inferior to the rest of the human race, designed to stamp them with a mark of slavery.

In the June 1789 issue of *The Monthly Review*, the anonymous reviewer of *The Interesting Narrative* called the book 'very seasonable, at a time when negro-slavery is the subject of public investigation; and it seems calculated to increase the odium that has been excited against the West-India planters ...' For this reviewer, too, the author's nativity was of primary significance: the review opened by remarking, 'We entertain no doubt of the general authenticity of this very intelligent African's story.' Although the author of *The Interesting Narrative* originally published his book without authenticating documentation, he added reviews, including this one, and testimonials to preface each of his subsequent editions.

Pro-slavery writers also recognized that *The Interesting Narrative* was 'calculated to increase the odium against the West-India planters' at a time when Parliament was actively considering bills to abolish the slave trade. But for three years the apologists for slavery left the authority of the work and the binomial identity of its author unchallenged, watching the book become a bestseller. The fourth edition, published in Dublin in 1791, alone sold 1900 copies. On 25 and 27 April 1792, however, while the author was in Edinburgh revising and promoting what would be the 5th edition of the *Narrative* (Edinburgh, 1792), the question of the author's true identity was raised in two London newspapers: *The Oracle* and *The Star*. *The Oracle* reported that

It is a fact that the Public may depend on, that *Gustavus Vassa*, who has publicly asserted that he was kidnapped in Africa, never was upon that Continent, but was born and bred up in the Danish Island of Santa Cruz, in the West Indies [now St. Croix in the U.S. Virgin Islands]. *Ex hoc uno disce omnes* [that one fact tells all]. What, we will ask any man of plain understanding, must that cause be, which can lean for support on falsehoods as audaciously propagated as they are easily detected?

Suddenly, both sides of the author's binomial Afro-British identity had been challenged. But what was at stake?

In 1789 the author's rhetorical ethos – his authority to speak as a victim and eye-witness of slavery in Africa, the West Indies, North America, Europe and the Middle East – was dependent on the African nativity he claimed. His autobiography was offered and received as the first extended account of slavery and the slave trade from a former slave's point of view. With the exception of his binomial friend and sometime collaborator Quobna Ottobah Cugoana, who had published his *Thoughts and Sentiments*

on the *Evil of Slavery* by subscription in London in 1787, the author of *The Interesting Narrative* was the first writer of African descent to present his work as self-authorized, proudly announcing it on the title-page as 'Written by Himself'. Cugoano and his friend published their works without any of the authenticating documentation or mediation by white authorities that prefaces the works of Phillis Wheatley or Ignatius Sancho and other black writers to reassure readers that the claim of authorship is valid and to imply that their words have been supervised before publication. Cugoano's *Thoughts and Sentiments* went unreviewed and unanswered, and hence his identity and authority went unchallenged. But the claim of authenticity by the author of *The Interesting Narrative* was quickly recognized by his readers to be fundamental to the effectiveness of the autobiography as a petition against the Atlantic slave trade. If an African could write and publish without the help or authorization of European intermediaries, and if he could attest from personal experience to the cruelty and inhumanity of the Middle Passage and slavery, he was *prima facie* evidence against the major arguments made by contemporaneous apologists for slavery. Furthermore, the binomial identity found on the title-page enabled the author to maintain his British identity, signified by the name Gustavus Vassa given him in slavery, as well as his newly announced African identity. Following the author's own usual practice, henceforth in this article I refer to him as Gustavus Vassa, except when he himself writes of his Olaudah Equiano identity.

Ironically, Vassa reverses the traditional rhetorical relationship between authorizing white and authorized black writers. In his capacity as the victimized African Equiano, his descriptions of his experience of having been enslaved, especially of his life in Africa and the horrors of the Middle Passage, serve to verify and thereby validate much of the evidence conventionally cited in abolitionist discourse. Vassa's memory of Africa as a pastoral and idyllic land corrupted by European contact reinforces a convention frequently found in the arguments by white abolitionists and disputed by apologists for slavery, who contended that slavery rescued Africans from a brutal existence and introduced them to Christianity and civilization.

Immediately recognizing the issues at stake in the challenge to his identity made by *The Oracle* and *The Star*, Vassa prefaced the 5th and subsequent editions of his *Narrative* with a letter addressed 'To the Reader'. He counter-attacked the 'invidious falsehood [that] appeared in the Oracle ... with a view to hurt my character, and to discredit and prevent the sale of my Narrative' (p.5). Typically, he was as concerned for his pocketbook as he was for his integrity. Sales depended on his authority, which derived from his Afro-British identity. To defend his 'character', Vassa also added a

short list of the names of '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' (p.5). The first of these six names is that of 'My friend Mrs. Baynes, formerly Miss Guerin' (p.238), the former Mary Guerin, the younger sister of Maynard and Elizabeth Martha Guerin, who was Vassa's godmother when he was baptized in 1759. Pascal's will (PROB 11/1142) shows that the Guerins were his cousins.

From the first edition on, Vassa tells us that he was born Olaudah Equiano in 1745 in what is now Nigeria, then kidnapped and enslaved by fellow Africans after he 'turned the age of eleven' (p.46), and sold by them into slavery 'at the end of six or seven months' (p.54) to Europeans. After an unspecified amount of time waiting off the coast of Africa on an 'African snow' (p.63), his new enslavers transported him to Barbados in the West Indies, a trip that normally took about two months. After staying 'in this island for a few days; I believe not above a fortnight', he was brought 'in a sloop' to Virginia, 'up a river a good way from the sea' (p.62). The voyage from Barbados to Virginia normally took three to four weeks. Approximately ten months had passed between his first capture in Africa and his arrival in Virginia. In Virginia, the young slave was bought by Mr Campbell, a local planter. After three months, Campbell sold him to Michael Henry Pascal, a lieutenant in the British Royal Navy who had been given leave to command the *Industrious Bee*, a commercial vessel. At this point, Pascal's new slave, soon re-named Gustavus Vassa, 'could smatter a little imperfect English', enough 'to understand him a little' (p.64). Pascal intended to give him 'for a present to some of his friends in England' (p.64). After an unusually long 'passage of thirteen weeks' (p.67), Vassa arrived at Falmouth, where, he tells us, he first saw snow. Vassa says that 'it was about the beginning of the spring 1757 when I arrived in England' (p.67). According to Vassa's account, combined with the surviving documentary evidence, probably about 16 months elapsed between his initial kidnapping in Africa and his arrival in England. He says that he spent 'some months' (p. 69) more on Guernsey before coming to London and meeting the Guerins in Westminster, where he was baptized in February 1759.

Vassa recognized that his memory of when he first reached England was not precise: in the first four editions of his *Narrative*, he opens the fourth chapter by observing that, at the beginning of 1759, 'It was now between two and three years since I first came to England'; from the fifth edition (1792) on, he revised this opening to read 'between three and four years' (p.77), perhaps in response to the challenge to his credibility by *The Oracle* and *The Star*. As an editor of Vassa's works, I have tried to establish the verifiability of at least some of the many details and dates found in his *Narrative*. Since my research has shown him to be remarkably accurate

whenever his information can be tested by external evidence, his mistakes and omissions become all the more fascinating.

Admiralty records (ADM) in the Public Record Office (PRO), Kew, and surviving issues of *The Virginia Gazette* lend support to Equiano's credibility and prove that he had an extraordinary memory: having already been on leave from the Royal Navy for six months, on 4 February 1752 Lieutenant Michael Henry Pascal successfully petitioned to have his leave extended another ten months because he 'had Now the Command of a Merch[an]t Ship, In the Virginia Trade' (ADM 1/2290; ADM 3/62); on 5 June 1752 Pascal advertised a reward in the newspaper for the return of four men, who had jumped ship from the *Industrious Bee*, out of a total of ten crew members who had sailed from London with him in February 1752 (ADM 7/87). Pascal's leave was further extended by the Admiralty Board, so that he might stay in 'Virginia in the Merchant's Service', for 12-month periods, on 1 February 1753, 9 February 1754, and 30 January 1755 (ADM 3/63). But by the latter date Pascal was already back in England.

Vassa's comments that while in Virginia on Mr Campbell's plantation he 'was a few weeks weeding grass' before he was 'sent for to [Campbell's] dwelling house to fan him' (p.62) suggest that Vassa probably reached Virginia in mid-1754. Colonial Office records in the PRO enable us to identify with a high degree of probability the vessel that would have brought Equiano from Africa to Barbados and the one that would have brought him from there to Virginia in mid-1754, if my calculations and Vassa's account are accurate. The *Ogden*, a snow owned by Thomas Stevenson & Co., cleared Liverpool, England, on 5 June 1753, to go to Bonny on the Bight of Biafra (the main source of Ibo slaves) in Africa, seeking 400 slaves. Under James Walker's command, the *Ogden* arrived at Barbados on 9 May 1754, bearing a cargo of 243 enslaved Africans. On 21 May the sloop *Nancy*, owned by Alexander Watson of Virginia and commanded by Richard Wallis, left Barbados with 31 slaves and brought them up the York River in Virginia on 13 June.<sup>3</sup> Campbell very probably bought Equiano soon thereafter.

Pascal must have bought Equiano from Campbell and renamed him Gustavus Vassa in early September 1754 because on 14 December 1754, about 13 weeks later, the London newspaper *The Public Advertiser* reported the arrival of the 'Industrious Bee, Pascall, from [Newfoundland], at Falmouth'. A stop at Newfoundland on the way from Virginia to avoid crossing the Atlantic more directly during the hurricane season would account for the unusually long voyage. And surviving meteorological data prove that Equiano would have experienced snow in Falmouth during the winter of 1754–55. Snow is infrequent enough to be noteworthy in Cornwall, where imported palm trees thrive in the mild climate. Analysis of

the meteorological records kept by William Borlase, Rector of Ludgvan, a small village approximately 25 miles west of Falmouth, reveals that 'Taking the winter periods into consideration 1754/55, 1769/70 were the snowiest' years in southern Cornwall during the period 1753 to 1772.<sup>4</sup> The first hard evidence of Vassa's existence we have is the appearance of his name on 6 August 1755 on the muster list of the *Roebuck* (ADM 36/6472). Prior to that date, not surprisingly, no documentary evidence of Vassa's existence has been found. The names of Pascal and Vassa's young friend, Richard Baker, appear on the muster book of the *Roebuck*, respectively, on 18 and 28 June 1755. The muster and pay books of the Royal Navy are very reliable as records of who were on which ships and at what time, whether members of the crew or not, because the ships' captains and pursers had to account for all expenses incurred onboard.

September 1754 is two years earlier than the date Vassa offers in the *Narrative* for his entry into Pascal's service, and December 1754 is much earlier than when he places himself in England in the first four editions. Other internal and external evidence also proves that he was in England before 'spring 1757': he tells us that he saw Admiral John Byng during Byng's trial, which took place aboard the *St. George* in Plymouth between 27 December 1756 and 27 January 1757; and he served on the *Savage*, listed as 'Gusta Worcester', from 12 to 21 January 1757 (ADM 36/6573). Records of muster lists often attempted to spell foreign-sounding names phonetically, with widely varying degrees of success. Vassa was discharged from the *Savage* on 21 January at Deal, where he 'remained some short time' before Pascal ordered him to come to London.

Vassa probably first met the Guerins in February or March 1757, about three and a half years after he had initially been kidnapped in Africa. When they met he 'could not stand for several months, and ... was obliged to be sent to St. George's Hospital', Westminster, where 'the doctors wanted to cut [his] left leg off ... apprehending a mortification' (p.71) from the chilblains he had probably suffered while serving on the *Savage*. An inflammation of the ear, hand, or foot caused by exposure to moist cold, a chilblain in severe cases could lead to ulceration of the affected extremity. Immediately following his recovery from chilblains Vassa contracted small pox, requiring him to stay additional weeks in the hospital.<sup>5</sup> Although we cannot establish exactly when in 1757 Vassa first met the Guerins, Vassa had already been in English-speaking environments for approximately three years when he reached Westminster. On 10 November 1757, Vassa ('Vavasa'), fully recovered, joined Pascal aboard the *Jason* (ADM 36/6365). He served under Pascal during the next two years mainly at sea aboard the *Jason*, the *Royal George* (ADM 36/5743), and the *Namur* (ADM 36/6253) before returning to London at the beginning of 1759.

At this point, questions about the place and date of his nativity first arise. The parish register of St Margaret's church, Westminster, records the baptism on 9 February 1759 of 'Gustavus Vassa a Black born in Carolina 12 years old', indicating a birth date of 1746 or 1747. During the eighteenth century, 'Carolina' frequently encompassed both North and South Carolina. Vassa himself of course may not have been responsible for the information or misinformation regarding the place and date of his birth recorded at his baptism, but that information was presumably available to the future Mrs Baynes, who Vassa later said first knew him as African. The question of his place and date of birth comes up again in the historical record. Vassa's accounts of his voyages and military engagements while serving Pascal during the Seven Years War (1756–62) are almost all verifiable and impressively accurate, so much so that he either must have kept a journal or had a uniquely retentive memory. At a later point in his recounted life, he tells us that he was keeping a journal during his voyage to the Arctic. He does not mention in the *Narrative*, however, that just before Pascal reneged on his promise to free Vassa and instead sold him to a slave trader bound for the West Indies at the end of 1762, 'Gustavus Vassan' had been promoted by Pascal to the rating or rate of able seaman, the highest-paid, most skilled and prestigious rank below an officer in the Navy (ADM 32/5). When Vassa tells us in the *Narrative* that he joined the expedition led by Captain Constantine Phipps, later Lord Mulgrave, seeking a north-east passage through the Arctic Ocean in 1773, seven years after he had bought his freedom in the West Indies, he omits some information that greatly complicates the Equiano question. The muster book of the *Racehorse* records the entry on board, as of 17 May, of 'Gustavus Weston', identified as being an able seaman, aged 28, and born in South Carolina (ADM 36/7490). Given the approximate phonetic spelling of Vassa, and given that the rating or rank, age and birthplace match those of Vassa found in earlier muster lists, in the *Narrative* itself, and in the parish register of St Margaret's, and given that Mulgrave was one of the original subscribers to *The Interesting Narrative*, 'Gustavus Weston' was certainly Gustavus Vassa. The recorder of the *Racehorse* muster was not likely to have had either access to or interest in Vassa's baptismal record. Since the personal data very probably came from Vassa himself, now a free man, we must ask why, if he had indeed been born Olaudah Equiano in Africa, he chose to suppress these facts.

Assuming that the birth date of 1745 he gives in the *Narrative* is accurate, Vassa was younger than he admits when he left Africa, younger still if he was born in 1746 or 1747, as the ages recorded at his baptism and on his Arctic voyage suggest. A date of 1745, 1746, or 1747, however, could only have been approximate for an undocumented birth in either



Africa or South Carolina. The documentary evidence indicates that he was most probably between seven and nine years of age when Pascal first met him in Virginia, and thus he would have been between six and eight years old when initially kidnapped in Africa (approximately the same age Phillis Wheatley was when she was brought from Africa to Boston on 11 July 1761). The discrepancy between the ages and dates Vassa records in his *Narrative* and the external documentary evidence may be due simply to a confused memory of childhood events recounted some 40 years later. Or the discrepancy may have been rhetorically motivated: Vassa may have recognized that the younger he was thought to have been when he left Africa, the less credible his memories of his homeland would be. Even if Vassa was 'a Black born in Carolina' rather than in Africa, he might still have spoken 'no language but that of Africa' when Pascal first met him. During the first half of the eighteenth century, due to the low rate of acculturation of slaves born in Lowcountry South Carolina, an African or creole language, not English, might well have been such a slave's first language.<sup>6</sup> If he was a native of Carolina, his account of Africa may have been based on oral history and reading, rather than on personal experience. The evidence regarding his place and date of birth is clearly contradictory and will probably remain tantalizingly so. But wherever and whenever he had been born, by the time he met the Guerins, Vassa should have been quite proficient in English and thus not restricted to speaking only the language 'of Africa'. There can be no doubt that Vassa manipulated some of the facts in his autobiography.

Besides the prefatory list of character references the author added to the fifth and subsequent editions, what evidence external to *The Interesting Narrative* do we have that the identity of Olaudah Equiano existed before the name appeared in the first and subsequent editions of Vassa's book? As far as I have been able to discover, Vassa only twice used the name Equiano elsewhere in the published or manuscript writings he produced before, during, and after the imprints of the *Narrative*: in his solicitation for subscribers dated November 1788;<sup>7</sup> and in a co-signed letter published on 25 April 1789 in the newspaper *The Diary; Or Woodfall's Register*, writing as one of the 'Sons of Africa', he identifies himself as 'OLAUDAH EQUIANO, or GUSTAVUS VASSA' (p.344). Several co-signers, including his friend 'OTTOBAH CUGOANO, or JOHN STUART', also re-claim African identities that had been erased by slavery and baptism. In all other cases, however, from the first entries of his name in the muster lists of ships on which he served during the 1750s, 60s, and 70s, to his will drawn up in 1796, he is identified or identifies himself only as Gustavus Vassa. Nor was he, to my knowledge, ever referred to or addressed as Equiano by others in print or manuscript during his lifetime.

Although after 1786 Vassa became increasingly well known to both blacks and whites opposed to the African slave trade, none of them betrays any familiarity with his identity as Equiano. In his published and unpublished correspondence after 1787 Vassa uses the epithets 'the African', 'the Ethiopian', and a 'Son of Africa' to identify himself, but he uses none of these in any known works before 1787, including writings reproduced in his autobiography. One of the leading abolitionists, Granville Sharp, who knew Vassa personally at least since April 1779, when he gave him one of his books, refers in his journal on 19 March 1783 to 'Gustavus Vassa, a negro'. Sharp subscribed for two copies of the *Narrative*. Another leading abolitionist and friend, James Ramsay, had probably known Vassa since the period when they had both lived in the West Indies. In a manuscript in the Rhodes House Library, Oxford, probably written in 1788, Ramsay includes some of the African biographical details that would appear the following year in Vassa's *Interesting Narrative*. But Ramsay, who also was an original subscriber to the *Narrative*, never refers to Vassa as Equiano, and he could not have met Vassa in the West Indies before 1763. Hence, Ramsay's knowledge of Vassa's early life could only have come from the adult Vassa himself. From the evidence I have seen, the presence of the name Olaudah Equiano on the subscription proposal and title page of *The Interesting Narrative* in 1789 must have come as a revelation to friend and foe alike of Gustavus Vassa. They may have known that he claimed an African birth, but we have no proof yet that they knew of Olaudah Equiano before 1788.

## NOTES

1. All quotations taken from Vincent Carretta (ed.), *The Interesting Narrative and Other Writings* (New York: Penguin, 1995) are cited henceforth by page number parenthetically within the text.
2. My biographical findings have obvious implications for the issues raised by the Nigerian critic S.E. Ogude about the assumed veracity of Equiano and his reliability as a historical source on African life. In 'Facts into Fiction: Equiano's *Narrative* Reconsidered', *Research in African Literatures*, 13 (1982), pp.30–43, Ogude argues that because an 11-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' (p.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), pp.1–16, Ogude denies that linguistic evidence supports Equiano's account. Arguments for Equiano's memory of Africa have been made by Catherine Obianju Acholonu, 'The Home of Olaudah Equiano – a Linguistic and Anthropological Search', *Journal of Commonwealth Literature*, 22 (1987), pp.5–16, and Paul Edwards and Rosalind Shaw, 'The Invisible *Chi* in Equiano's *Interesting Narrative*', *Journal of Religion in Africa*, 19 (1989), pp.146–56. Despite his scepticism about Equiano's veracity, however, Ogude does not question Vassa/Equiano's fundamental identity as an African. The question remains, however, of what details were available to him. As my essay demonstrates, the surviving documentary evidence shows that Equiano's astounding ability to remember details from his

early life, at least from the time he met Michael Henry Pascal on, is indisputable, but that if and when he left Africa he was much younger than 11 years old.

3. I am deeply indebted to David Richardson for sharing with me information from the Du Bois Institute data set of slave-trade statistics (PRO CO 28/30 dd 61–dd 76) that enabled me to identify the *Ogden* as the most probable vessel bearing Equiano from the Bight of Biafra to Barbados by comparing the Du Bois data with those found in Walter Minchinton, Celia King and Peter Waite, (eds.), *Virginia Slave-Trade Statistics 1698–1775* (Richmond: Virginia State Library, 1984), p.155, and with the information Equiano gives us about his arrival in Virginia. The sloop *Nancy*, built in Virginia in 1753, which most likely brought him to Virginia from Barbados, was not the same slave-trading sloop *Nancy*, built in Massachusetts Bay in 1762, on which Vassa, then owned by Robert King, sailed under the command of Thomas Farmer in 1766: Elizabeth Donnan, *Documents Illustrative of the History of the Slave Trade to America*, 4 vols. (Washington, DC: Carnegie Institution, 1930–1935), Vol.4, p.620. I gained access to some of the relevant PRO records through the Virginia Colonial Records Project Database at the Library of Virginia.
4. J. Oliver, 'William Borlase's Contribution to Eighteenth-Century Meteorology and Climatology', *Annals of Science*, 25 (1969), p.309. I thank Joanna Mattingly, Assistant Curator at the Cornwall Maritime Museum, for bringing Oliver's article to my attention.
5. Unfortunately, records of regular admissions and releases from St George's Hospital during this period do not exist. I am very grateful to Terry Gould, Archivist at the St George's Hospital Library and Archive, for checking the available records for me.
6. Philip D. Morgan, *Slave Counterpoint: Black Culture in the Eighteenth-Century Chesapeake & Lowcountry* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1998), p.465.
7. A surviving copy of the subscription proposal for the first edition of *The Interesting Narrative*, to which Josiah Wedgwood subscribed, includes a holograph note to Wedgwood signed 'Gustavus Vassa – The African'. Dr Mark Jones recently found the proposal among the Wedgwood papers at Keele University Library (74/12632) and very kindly sent me a photocopy of it.