

Autobiography and Memory: Gustavus Vassa, alias Olaudah Equiano, the African

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Recent scholarship has raised doubts about whether or not abolitionist Olaudah Equiano, who was known in his own lifetime as Gustavus Vassa, was born in Africa. While baptismal and naval documents indicate that he was born in South Carolina, it is argued here that his autobiographical account is nonetheless accurate, although allowing for reflection and information that was learned later in life. Information on facial markings (ichi) and other cultural features that are recounted in Vassa's account indicate that he had first hand experience of his Igbo homeland and that he was about the age he thought he was at the time of his forced departure from the Bight of Biafra on a slave ship in 1754.

Ex hoc uno disce omens – this one fact tells all
The Oracle, 25 April 1792

The Interesting Narrative of the Life of Olaudah Equiano, or Gustavus Vassa, the African. Written by Himself, published in 1789 at the time of Parliamentary hearings into the slave trade, played a key role in the abolition of the British slave trade. Its author promoted the abolitionist cause on speaking tours and through political action, and hence was clearly a strong voice that ultimately was heeded in abolition in 1807, alas a decade after his death in 1797.¹ The *Interesting Narrative* went through nine editions by 1794 and, at the time, was perceived as ‘a principal instrument in bringing about the motion for a repeal of the Slave-Act,’ although in fact the motion before Parliament was introduced in January 1789 and the *Interesting Narrative* was only published in March.² Nonetheless, the book was influential in shaping public opinion thereafter and therefore was important in the ultimate withdrawal of Britain from the slave trade. It is perhaps no wonder, then, that Olaudah Equiano, alias Gustavus Vassa, the ‘African,’ has been described as the ‘the vanguard of the Abolitionist movement in England.’³ Certainly his stature, as perceived through

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historical hindsight if not always appreciated, was comparable to that of Ramsay, Sharp, Clarkson and Wilberforce. And with the possible exception of Ottobah Cugoano, there was no other African in London who commanded such respect as a spokesperson for black people, whether African born or descendants of those forcibly removed from Africa.⁴

My concern is with the relationship between autobiography and memory, and the embellishments of memory that are characteristic of the genre. While S. E. Ogude has claimed that '*The Interesting Narrative* is properly speaking, a historical fiction rather than an autobiography', I think that there can be little doubt that Vassa consciously wrote an account of his life as he wanted people to know about it, and in this respect, the account is autobiographical, whatever other literary genres influenced Vassa.⁵ This article focuses specifically on Vassa's claim that he was an African, born in the interior of the Bight of Biafra where he only spoke the Igbo language and where he was exposed to the culture that has come to be recognized as Igbo.⁶ Despite the existence of documentation that refutes his claim to an African birth, it is argued here that circumstantial evidence indicates that he was born where he said he was, and that, in fact, *The Interesting Narrative* is reasonably accurate in its details, although, of course, subject to the same criticisms of selectivity and self-interested distortion that characterize the genre of autobiography. The existence of records that indicate he was born in South Carolina has implications for understanding the relationship between autobiography and memory, and the reasons that individuals remember what they do and the ways in which memory is confirmed and embellished, and in this case perhaps distorted for reasons worth considering.

The problem of deciphering the early life of the author of *The Interesting Narrative* hinges on his name: Equiano or Vassa, what is he to be called? He says that his African birth name was Olaudah Equiano, with his slave name being Gustavus Vassa. Here the man is referred to as Vassa, because that was the name he used himself, as evidenced in his baptism, his naval records, marriage certificate and will. The name Equiano will be reserved for the subject of his autobiography – himself. In *The Interesting Narrative*, Vassa often reveals what he chose, consciously or unconsciously, to select from his memory, and there are gaps in information that indicate some things that he wanted to forget. Where he was born was not one of these, and he states clearly that he was born in Africa – 'in a charming fruitful vale, named Essaka.' What is the significance, then, of documentation that says otherwise, and why is it relevant where and when he was born? Where this prominent political activist and intellectual came from was questioned in his own time, although in that context, the charges that he faked his account of his childhood might well be perceived as clearly fictitious and malicious, while more recent doubts can be credited to the revelations that arise from scholarly enquiry.

While not challenging Vassa's claim to being born in Africa, or indeed his identity as Igbo, Ogude nonetheless has concluded that 'Equiano's narrative is to a large extent fictional', based on the 'popular eighteenth century literary form: the voyage.'⁷ Ogude thinks that Vassa consciously fictionalized material drawn from a wide variety of sources, including published European accounts of Africa, the tales and traditions that circulated among slaves and former slaves, as well as details from his

own life. In his account of Africa, Vassa's information was 'directly derived from the eighteenth century geography of Africa as was then conceived by European writers,' and wherever such information is verifiable, 'the evidence presented by Equiano almost always leads to a European source.'⁸ Ogude has concluded that 'we are reasonably certain that whenever his accounts can be verified, he tends always to tell less than the truth.'⁹

Following the lead of Ogude, Vincent Carretta has also challenged the authenticity of Vassa's account of his childhood, basing his analysis on documentary evidence that Vassa was born in South Carolina.¹⁰ According to Carretta,

Recent biographical discoveries cast doubt on Equiano's story of his birth and early years. The available evidence suggests that the author of *The Interesting Narrative* may have invented rather than reclaimed an African identity Baptismal and naval records say that he was born in South Carolina around 1747. If they are accurate, he invented his African childhood and his much-quoted account of the Middle Passage on a slave ship.¹¹

The issue is clear: are his descriptions of his experiences of Africa and the notorious 'Middle Passage' fabricated or are they derived from his personal experience? It might be argued that it does not matter that much in terms of Vassa's impact on the abolition movement, which was profound, because a fictionalized account of his childhood might have been just as effective for political purposes to garner support for the abolitionist cause as an account that was in fact the truth. Carretta has even argued that the fictitious nature of the first part of *The Interesting Narrative* is all the more important, demonstrating Vassa's great skill as a writer. While Ogude has criticized the autobiographical accuracy of Vassa's account, Carretta has taken the argument a step further in questioning the authenticity of Vassa's place of birth and, hence, whether or not he had any first hand experiences in Africa.

These critiques of *The Interesting Narrative* highlight a recurrent problem of verification and perspective in using autobiography for scholarly purposes. It is fortunate for this discussion that Vassa had to confront sceptics in his own day, and those who wished to discredit him focused specifically on the issue of where he was born. As the London newspaper, *The Oracle*, clearly stated in 1792, 'Ex hoc uno discemus – this one fact tells all.'¹² That he was a great writer is not in question, since his text has survived and is widely praised. Where he was born is nonetheless relevant. Since Vassa has been widely recognized as an African, and his political clout was based on this very detail, it is worth reconsidering the available evidence. Moreover, the contradictions among the various sources are worthy of reflection because of the methodological issues of how conflicting evidence is assessed.

Vassa's *Interesting Narrative* was a powerful influence on public opinion in his day, and in recent times, the book has been deemed one of the most significant examples of the surviving memory of the slave trade. According to Henry Louis Gates, *The Interesting Narrative* 'became the prototype of the nineteenth-century slave narrative.'¹³ Despite its inspirational value before 1807, it has been thought that the book experienced a long period of relative obscurity after British abolition, and, consequently,

Vassa's contribution to the abolition movement has been overlooked and sometimes trivialized.¹⁴ When Thomas Hodgkin published an excerpt in his collection of sources, *Nigerian Perspectives*, historians, anthropologists and literary scholars were quick to note its importance, relying on *The Interesting Narrative* for information on mid eighteenth-century life in the interior of the Bight of Biafra.¹⁵ In 1967, the anthropologist G. I. Jones published annotated excerpts on the African portion of the account, Paul Edwards produced the first modern version of the text in 1969, and the eminent Nigerian historian A. E. Afigbo published an essay in 1981 that he had intended as an introduction to a critical edition whose completion was interrupted by the Nigerian Civil War.¹⁶ Some scholars have insisted that Vassa's account is important because there is virtually no other information on the interior of the Bight of Biafra in the eighteenth century. This is a pessimistic view of available source material. Historians have generally relied on Vassa's account because it is one of the few readily accessible sources, to be sure, but there is considerably more information on the Bight of Biafra and its interior than is generally recognized because this region was one of the major sources of enslaved Africans taken to the Americas, and especially for the British trade.¹⁷ Nonetheless, as Adam Hochschild has noted, since the 'rediscovery' of Vassa's account in the 1960s, 'scholars have valued it as the most extensive account of an eighteenth-century slave's life' and the difficult passage from slavery to freedom.¹⁸

The 'Middle Passage' imagery derived from Vassa's account has been widely cited and reprinted. As Louise Rolingher has argued, 'anthropologists and Igbo nationalists have . . . shown a keen interest in Olaudah and his narrative, [but] by far the greatest interest has come from scholars of comparative, English, and American literature, and more recently, those of cultural studies. Their focus has been . . . his *Narrative* as a part of an American literary genre.'¹⁹ Gates has stated that the *Interesting Narrative* 'created the first large audience for any black writer in America,' and popularity only increased in the last third of the twentieth century.²⁰ As James Walvin has argued, Equiano's identity in his adult life was with England and more generally with the British-dominated 'Black Atlantic', and he was the first black person to command a large audience in Britain, as well as in the newly independent United States of America.²¹

The authenticity of *The Interesting Narrative* was a subject of concern in Vassa's time. In a letter to William Hughes, Bath, 10 October 1793, William Langworthy, recommending Vassa and his book, noted that 'the simplicity that runs through his Narrative is singularly beautiful, and that beauty is heightened by the idea that it is *true*; this is all that I shall say about this book.'²² The emphasis on truth was in the original. Langworthy noted 'the active part he [Vassa] took in bringing about the motion for a repeal of the Slave Act, [which] has given him much celebrity as a public man; and, in all the varied scenes of chequered life, through which he has passed, his private character and conduct have been irreproachable.' Vassa was 'engaged in so noble a cause as the freedom and salvation of his enslaved and unenlightened countrymen.' 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.

But what is to be believed in *The Interesting Narrative*? Where he was born is perhaps the most crucial element in the narrative. The reliance on memory as portrayed in this autobiography is the issue being addressed here. What did he remember? What did he forget? What is not clear? What did he hide? According to his own assessment of his autobiography,

My life and fortune have been extremely chequered, and my adventures various. Even those I have related are considerably abridged. If any incident in this little work should appear uninteresting and trifling to most readers, I can only say, as my excuse for mentioning it, that almost every event of my life made an impression on my mind, and influenced my conduct. I early accustomed myself to look at the hand of God in the minutest occurrence, and to learn from it a lesson of morality and religion; and in this light every circumstance I have related was to me of importance.²³

His observation certainly extended to the name that he was given, probably with some degree of humility because of its significance, but which he adopted and exploited for political ends.

He claims that when his master, Michael Henry Pascal, gave him the name Gustavus Vassa at age 12 while crossing the Atlantic in 1754, he ‘refused to be called so.’ He apparently had not objected to the names he had been given earlier – Michael on board the slave ship, and then Jacob in Virginia – and he could not possibly have known who his namesake was in 1754, but when he ‘refused to answer to my new name, which at first I did, it gained me many a cuff; so at length I submitted, and by which I have been known ever since.’²⁴ I would suggest that his apparent reluctance is probably a literary device to make the point that his destiny was predetermined. The choice of name seems to have been prophetic, since his namesake was none other than the Swedish national hero, Gustavus Vasa (1496–1560), king of Sweden (1523–1560), founder of the modern Swedish state and the Vasa dynasty.²⁵ Known as Gustavus Eriksson before his coronation, King Gustavus I was the son of Erik Johansson, a Swedish senator and nationalist, who was killed in the massacre at Stockholm in 1520, under the orders of King Christian II of Denmark, attempting to assert his control over Sweden under the Kalmar Union. Gustavus was imprisoned but escaped to lead the peasants of Dalarna to victory over the Danes, being elected protector of Sweden in 1521. In 1523 the Riksdag at Strängnäs elected him king, ending the Kalmar Union.

Two centuries later, English playwright, Henry Brooke, recorded these heroic deeds in his play, *Gustavus Vasa, The Deliverer of his Country*, published in 1739. The play was banned for political reasons and was not actually staged in London until 1805 in Covent Garden. However, it was performed in Dublin in 1742 as *The Patriot*, and it was republished in 1761, 1778, 1796 and 1797. According to Vincent Carretta, ‘replication . . . kept the play and its discourse of political slavery before the British public.’²⁶ Moreover, the example was also kept before the public because the reigning king of Sweden from 1771 until his tragic death in 1792 was the popular Gustavus Vasa III, who was murdered by Count Ankarstrom at an opera, dying of wounds on 29 March 1792. The tragedy became the inspiration for Giuseppe Verdi’s *Un Ballo in Maschera*.

The significance of the name Gustavus Vassa, as an African, figured into the London imagination as an image of an African Moses comparable to the Swedish model.

Did Vassa shun his assigned name, and the fate that was bestowed upon him as a leader of his people in the abolitionist cause? A careful reading of his protestations confirms the view that opposition to his name was a literary device, an act of overt modesty, not the reaction of a precocious pre-teen expressing his resistance. He always used the name Gustavus Vassa, even after publication of his *Interesting Narrative* in which he popularized his birth name as Equiano, which appears to be derived from Ekwuno, Ekweano, Ekwoanya or Ekwealuo, all common Igbo names.²⁷ In the first edition, Vassa stated that he 'was obliged to bear the present name [Vassa], by which I have been known ever since,'²⁸ while in the ninth edition in 1794, he only stated that it was the 'name I have been known ever since.' According to Carretta,

except for its appearance on the title page, the name Olaudah Equiano was never used by the author of *The Interesting Narrative* in either public or private written communication. Whether in print, unpublished correspondence, or in his will, he always identified himself as Gustavus Vassa.²⁹

Carretta's claim requires a slight qualification, which he makes himself.³⁰ He did use his birth name Equiano on other occasions, but apparently never alone. He identified himself with both names in soliciting subscriptions in November 1788, again in co-signing a letter published 25 April 1789, writing as one of the 'Sons of Africa,' and in a letter dated 14 May 1792, Grosvenor Street, to 'the Lords Spiritual and Temporal, and the Commons of the Parliament of Great Britain.' Otherwise, his marriage certificate, his will, and the rental agreement for his flat in Plaisterers' Hall, near the London City Wall, are all in the name of Vassa, as is virtually all other documentation.³¹ Why scholars and the student public have used his 'African' name, rather than the name he actually used, is a subject worthy of reflection. It says more about those who identify with the idea of 'Equiano' than about the life of Vassa. In the case of Carretta's biography, however, it is clear that the title, *Equiano, the African, Biography of a Self Made Man*, plays to the idea that Vassa was not born in Africa but created the story of Equiano and an African birth. Although often qualifying his discussion of whether or not Vassa was telling the truth about where he was born, Carretta presents a picture that has Vassa born in South Carolina and not in Igboland.

Vassa appears to have attached significance to his assigned name because it drew on public knowledge of the history of his Swedish namesake. He seems to have interpreted his experiences in the context of his perception of destiny, which derived from a religious conceptualization based on his childhood acculturation as Igbo. As Paul Edwards and Rosalind Shaw have demonstrated, the concept of '*chi*' pervaded Igbo cosmology and was a factor in the psychology of Vassa.³² As a child, he would have learned that the relationship of an individual with the supernatural was special, depending upon a personal *chi*. As he stated in *The Interesting Narrative*, 'I regard myself as a *particular favourite of Heaven*, and acknowledge the mercies of Providence in every occurrence of my life.'³³ His apparent reluctance when named Vassa appears to have been related to the necessity of accepting his fate. Indeed his comments on his

personal destiny are consistent with this interpretation. On board ship to England with his new master, Pascal, he noted that he was 'still at a loss to conjecture my destiny.' He wanted to return to Africa, but he came to accept the fact that he 'was reserved for another fate.'³⁴ His recognition of this Igbo philosophical construct must have become more coherent to Vassa as he grew older and reflected on his life. He was, after all, the acknowledged leader of the black poor of London, and he was determined to lead his people out of bondage.

The apparent cracks in the Equiano edifice arise from documents that state that Vassa was born in South Carolina, rather than in West Africa.³⁵ The first document is his baptismal record from St. Margaret's Church, London, 9 February 1759, and the second is the muster book of the ship, *Racehorse*, from the Arctic expedition of Constantine Phipps in the summer of 1773. According to Carretta,

... surprisingly, his baptismal record in 1759 and naval records from his Arctic voyage in 1773 suggest that he may well have been born in South Carolina, not Africa. External contradictions are especially intriguing because Equiano's account of his life is generally remarkably verifiable when tested against documentary and historical evidence, so much so that deviations from the truth seem more likely to have been the result of artistic premeditation than absentmindedness. From the available evidence, one could argue that the author of *The Interesting Narrative* invented an African identity rather than reclaimed one.³⁶

The entry in the parish register for St. Margaret's Church for 9 February 1759 reads: 'Gustavus Vassa a black born in Carolina 12 years old.'³⁷ Besides contradicting Vassa's autobiography and his claim to an African birth, this information is at odds with the age he gives for when he was enslaved (11) and for when he arrived in England (12), which was in 1753–1754, a difference of more than four years, and at variance with his original assertion that he first arrived in England in 1757. In the muster book of the *Racehorse*, Gustavus Vassa is not listed, but a Gustavus Weston, identified as a seaman, aged 28, is. Despite the misspelling of Vassa as Weston, the muster roll confirms that Vassa was on board, which we already knew from *The Interesting Narrative*, but more to the point, it is written that he was born in South Carolina.³⁸ The question arises as to why Vassa was on the Arctic expedition. He was not an 'ordinary seaman,' as listed in the muster roll and noted by Carretta, but rather he assisted Dr. Charles Irving, naval surgeon and inventor, in his experiments in distilling seawater.³⁹

Carretta has attempted to resolve the contradictions in the chronology of Vassa's early life by explaining that he was probably born in 1747 rather than 1745, and in any event was younger when he arrived in England than what is claimed in *The Interesting Narrative*. Hence not only where he was born is contested, but when. According to Carretta,

... assuming that the birth date of 1745 in the *Narrative* is accurate, Vassa must have been younger than he claims 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 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 he says he was initially kidnapped in Africa.⁴⁰

If the baptismal record is accurate and he was 12 in February 1759, he would have been born in 1747, as Carretta concludes, but the evidence of the Arctic expedition is not the same, as Carretta claims, Vassa testifying that he was 28 in 1773, suggesting a birth date in 1745, as he states in his *Narrative*. 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*. When he was writing in 1788, he thought that it was ‘about the beginning of the year 1757 when I arrived in England, and I was near twelve years of age at the time,’ when in fact it was December 1754, a mistake he addressed in a subsequent edition of his *Interesting Narrative* without changing his estimated date of birth. 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.

But what did Vassa say about his early life, and what was the chronology of this period? After ‘he turned the age of eleven’ he was kidnapped, and eventually sold to a British slave ship ‘at the end of six or seven months,’ eventually reaching Barbados, where he remained only ‘a few days, . . . not above a fortnight,’ before being taken to Virginia. In the summer of 1754, one Mr. Campbell purchased him for his tobacco farm, but three months later, he sold the boy to Michael Henry Pascal, who at the time was captain of the merchant ship, *Industrious Bee*, which arrived in England in December 1754. As Carretta has demonstrated, Pascal was in Virginia in 1754, not in 1756, more than two years earlier than Vassa recounted in the first editions of the *Narrative*. Hence, the various editions of *The Interesting Narrative* give confusing and contradictory dates for the period 1754–1757. Vassa initially claimed that he had been in England ‘between two and three years’ before his baptism in 1759, but in the 1792 edition, he revised this to read ‘between three and four years,’ which is more consistent with the known facts about the date of his arrival in late 1754. The difference in a couple of years is significant because it affects what Vassa might have remembered and what he might have learned later or otherwise fabricated. According to Vassa’s own chronology, it was about 16 months from the time of his kidnapping until his arrival in England in mid December 1754, initially spending ‘some months’ in Guernsey.⁴¹

There is no reason to assume that Vassa’s estimated date of birth in 1745 is accurate, or that his age on the baptismal record is correct. The adjustments in Vassa’s recollection of when he first reached London can be explained as the attempt of the adult Vassa to reconstruct his childhood. While his baptism and his enlistment on the Arctic expedition are not the only evidence that information about his life was sometimes inaccurate, it is another matter to assume that he consciously misled virtually everyone he knew about his place of birth. Why not assume that the age he remembered at the time of his enslavement is approximately correct, as

are his recollections of key events during the Seven Years' War in 1756–1763, and by extension backward, to his purchase by Pascal in 1754? I do not think Carretta is correct that 'if and when he left Africa he was probably much younger than eleven years old.' If, in fact, Vassa was born in Africa, there is little reason to doubt Vassa's estimate of his age of enslavement at age 11. As a boy, Vassa was not put in fetters on board the slave ship, suggesting that he was as young as 11–12. After checking dates in *The Interesting Narrative* provided by Vassa, not surprisingly, it can be seen that Vassa was sometimes mistaken. However, this information does not necessarily mean that he was younger than he claimed when he entered Pascal's service, as Carretta has assumed.

The internal evidence suggests that he was using his age of enslavement as a constant in his efforts at chronological reconstruction, not his date of birth. Thus if he was about 11 when he was enslaved and 12 when he reached England, it means that he was most likely born in 1742 or 1743, perhaps three years before he reckoned, rather than two years afterwards. The first convincing documentation on his age and hence date of birth is from 1753–1754, when he was enslaved and taken to Virginia via Barbados, taking an estimated 16 months to reach England after being kidnapped. If this had happened at age 11, he would have been 12 when Pascal bought him, 17 when he was baptized, and 20 in 1762 when Pascal sold him back to the West Indies after the end of the Seven Years' War, 24, when he gained his freedom in 1766, 31 when he was on the Arctic expedition in 1773, 47 when he published the *Interesting Narrative*, and 55 when he died in 1797. If he were 11 when he was enslaved, he would have remembered more than if he had been a boy of seven or eight. At 11, one does not usually forget language and, by then, one has been introduced into many facets of culture and society, more than at seven or eight. What Vassa says he remembers is more consistent with the memory of an 11-year-old than someone younger.⁴²

The methodological issue becomes, then, why it is best to accept his estimate of how old he was when he was kidnapped, rather than some other benchmark. Of course, this assumes that he was telling the truth that he was kidnapped, and not inventing a story when in fact he was born in South Carolina. Memory, autobiography and what actually happened are not the same, and hence the attempt to chronicle Vassa's childhood is indeed fraught with uncertainties and subject to interpretation. On the one hand, there are two documents that confirm a Carolina birth, and on the other hand, there is cultural information contained in *The Interesting Narrative* sufficient to question the veracity of the baptismal record from St. Margaret's Church and the naval records of the Arctic expedition, although it cannot be denied that the existence of independent documents stating a Carolina birth appear to be conclusive proof that he was not born in Africa. In my opinion, however, 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.

Vassa states that 'I was born, in a charming fruitful vale, named Essaka.' Very possibly, this is to be identified with Isseke, in Orlu, in central Igboland. As Catherine Obianju Acholonu has argued, numerous cultural and linguistic similarities between Orlu and Vassa's description lend support to this identification.⁴³ It has also been suggested that 'Essaka' is to be identified as Nsukka, in northern Igbo country, again on the basis in the similarity of names.⁴⁴ Cultural features, most especially the use of *ichi* scarification, the veneration of pythons, the use of anchor-shaped money and the practice of celebrating two ceremonies before the yam harvest, could well be based on Vassa's own memory, probably embellished with information that he learned from other Igbo speakers in London but, nonetheless, deriving from his own experience. The cultural features that Vassa recounts were very probably characteristic of many parts of Igboland in the eighteenth century, although this is based on later information that is being read backwards in time. Hence any identification should be treated with caution, but the area of central or northern Igboland seems most likely, rather than the area west of the Niger that was subject to Benin, despite Vassa's initial reference to Benin.⁴⁵ The identification is uncertain because Vassa earlier stated, in a letter in June 1788, almost a year before the publication of the *Interesting Narrative*, his desire 'to return to my estate in Elese, in Africa,' where he would greet the 'worthy senators there, as the Lord liveth, we will have such a libation of pure virgin palm-wine, as shall make their hearts glad!!!'⁴⁶ The reference to 'Elese' is unclear, but possibly also refers to 'Essaka.'

Vassa described 'Essaka' as being 'in one of the most remote and fertile' provinces of the Kingdom of Benin, and identified this province in the first edition as 'Eboe,' a detail deleted in all subsequent editions. On the basis of the Benin reference, G. I. Jones has suggested that 'Essaka' was likely to have been in northern Ika country, west of the Niger River, although there is no place there that resembles the name.⁴⁷ The reference to Benin is perhaps a later interjection in an effort to situate his home. Vassa's account provides no indication of the distance between Essaka and the capital of Benin, but on the basis of his memory, Vassa thought that 'our subjection to the king of Benin was little more than nominal; for every transaction of government, as far as my slender observation extended, was conducted by chiefs or elders.'⁴⁸ By referring to Benin, it seems that he was trying to situate his home within contemporary geographical knowledge. Specifically, he was influenced by the tracts of the American Quaker, Anthony Benezet, who wrote about the Kingdom of Benin but had nothing at all to say about Igboland or its people, although sometimes it is claimed that Benezet influenced what Vassa wrote about Igbo society and culture.⁴⁹ Vassa seems to have transposed what he learned later onto his childhood memory, since there was almost certainly no connection between his home and the Kingdom of Benin.

Vassa states that his village relied on a system of government that he identified as 'embrenché.' According to Vassa, 'every transaction of the government . . . was conducted by chiefs or elders of the place My father was one of those elders or chiefs . . . , and was styled Embrenché; a term, as I remember, importing the highest distinction, and signifying in our language a mark of grandeur.'⁵⁰ Afigbo equates

the term with *ndichie* or elders, and which sometimes has the meaning is ‘ancestors,’ and notes Vassa’s confusion in conflating the term for ritual scarification and elders.⁵¹ Similarly, Acholonu considers Vassa’s term a contraction of two terms, *igbu ichi*, the scarification given to males on their foreheads, and *mgburichi*, the men with such scarification.⁵² According to Vassa, the men on the governing council had the *ichi* marking:

This mark is conferred on the person entitled to it, by cutting the skin across at the top of the forehead, and drawing it down to the eye-brows; and, while it is in this situation, applying a warm hand, and rubbing it until it shrinks up into a thick *weal* across the lower part of the forehead. Most of the judges and senators were thus marked; my father had long borne it: I had seen it conferred on one of my brothers, and I was also *destined* to receive it by my parents.⁵³

Vassa had not yet undergone the scarification ceremony because he was not old enough; it was usually performed at age 13 or 14, as he witnessed with his older brother.

The actual operation was horrendous, and of such severity in its pain and significance that a boy destined to receive it as a sign of his adulthood and citizenship would undoubtedly be very conscious of when it was destined to happen. He was kidnapped before this was undertaken, and in his own estimation, a couple of years before it would have been done; that is he was about 11, which is what he claims. The significance of this rite of passage was clear; it meant that he would eventually join his father as a member of the *ama ala*, the governing council. Whether or not there is a direct linear connection, according to Acholonu, this association with a tradition of scarification could mean that Equiano/Vassa came from the Ekwealuo family of Essike in Orlu, although it is only a possibility.⁵⁴ Children were kidnapped, because after a boy received the *ichi* it was difficult to sell him into slavery. British slave traders were reluctant to purchase males who had received this facial marking, although there is no evidence that Vassa had any way of knowing about this practice other than from personal experience. The practice was certainly not common knowledge in London or elsewhere outside of Igboland, except perhaps among slave traders in Liverpool and Bristol. In the 1790s, slave trader Hugh Crow learned of this scarification, although he did not use the Igbo term to describe it, but he did note that the men who had such scarification were called ‘Breche, signifying gentleman or . . . , son of a gentleman,’ and hence Vassa’s account is the earliest reference to the practice and the social and political system that was associated with it.⁵⁵

In his enslaved sojourn to the Niger delta, Vassa passed through the hands of a number of merchants and owners. The first whom he identified, and connected with his kidnapping, were ‘red men’ who are most certainly to be equated with the Aro, who dominated the slave trade of the interior of the Bight of Biafra, supplying slaves to the two principal ports, Bonny and Old Calabar. Vassa called these people ‘Oye-Eboe,’ that is ‘*onye Ìgbò*,’ Igbo people.⁵⁶ Vassa described these people as ‘stout mahogany-coloured men from the South-west of us: we call them Oye-Eboe, which term signifies red men living at a distance,⁵⁷ the reddish colour coming from the

use of camwood as a cosmetic. According to Vassa, these men were often seen in the market trading in 'fire-arms, gun-powder, hats, beads, and dried fish,' as well as in 'odoriferous woods and earth, and our salt of wood-ashes.' Most importantly, because of the Aro monopoly of the slave trade, Vassa noted that these 'red men' 'always carry slaves through our land; but the strictest account is exacted of their manner of procuring them before they are suffered to pass.' According to Vassa, 'Sometimes indeed we sold slaves to them, but they were only prisoners of war, or such among us as had been convicted of kidnapping, or adultery, and some other crimes which we esteemed heinous.' Upon reflection, Vassa thought that 'this practice of kidnapping induces me to think, that, notwithstanding all our strictness, their principal business among us was to trepan our people. I remember too they carried great sacks along with them, which not long after, I had an opportunity of fatally seeing applied to that infamous purpose.'⁵⁸

At the time of Vassa's kidnapping in 1753, the Aro had developed an elaborate commercial network, which was centred on Arochukwu, where the shrine of *ibinukpabi* was located. Aro settlers had established satellite towns in key locations in both Igbo and Ibibio territory that were the sites of markets, which were held on a four-day rotational cycle. The Aro mechanism of 'bulking' slaves centred on two principal fairs in the interior, one at Bende and the other at Uburu. By the middle of the eighteenth century, one of the largest satellite Aro settlements was at Ndizuogu, close to Orlu, and connected with both Uburu and Bende. Beyond Ndizuogu, the network stretched northward to Nsukka and beyond.⁵⁹ The information Vassa provides on those who kidnapped him and his sister is one of the earliest reports on the Aro, and Vassa's account is not to be found in any known contemporary source in England, although it was known that merchants from Bonny and Old Calabar sometimes attended inland fairs, presumably those at Bende and Uburu. The route followed by Vassa to the coast was towards the 'south-west,' according to Vassa's own calculations in his effort to relate his travels to the location of the sun and paid attention to directions in a vain hope of escaping. On the basis of his observations on language and culture, he remained within Igbo country for much of his journey, for he noted differences of dialect but also found that he understood what other people said until he reached the delta, apparently at the town of Tinmah, which has otherwise not been identified but seems to refer to a 'Moco' or Ibibio settlement on the borders of the delta.⁶⁰

After Tinmah, people no longer spoke a language that Vassa could understand, which is consistent with his having entered the Niger delta. He observed cultural traits, specifically that people filed their teeth, which he had not known before. The practice also suggests that he may have been in an Ibibio area inland from Bonny. He notes that at Tinmah, the currency was the 'core,' which has usually been identified as cowry shells, which were widely current in West Africa, although not in Igboland in the eighteenth century. Actually Vassa identifies 'core' as 'little white shells, the size of the finger nail,' stating that they were known in Britain as 'core.' However, it is possible that he was referring to *akori*, or coral beads that were used as currency on the lower Niger River and had been exported from the Kingdom of Benin and the Niger delta westward as far as the Gold Coast since the sixteenth century, at least. Vassa may

have been confused in equating 'core' with the cowry rather than *akori*, on the basis of what he learned about the use of cowries as money in other parts of Africa, from reading Benezet and other sources on West Africa. Hence the reference to his sale price as being 172 'core' makes sense if the reference is to beads, but a ridiculously small number of cowries if the reference is to shells.⁶¹ The large canoes that took the young Vassa through the delta must have belonged to the merchants of Bonny, although he does not refer to the port, instead boarding directly a waiting ship, which is consistent with the way trade often operated at Bonny.⁶²

Twelve ships from the Bight of Biafra have been identified as disembarking slaves in Barbados in 1754, but most of the ships either arrived in Barbados too early or too late in the year to fit Vassa's description of his time in Barbados and Virginia.⁶³ The most likely ship is the *Ogden*, a snow from Liverpool owned by Thomas Stevenson & Co., which left for Bonny on 5 June 1753, under the command of Captain James Walker. While intending to purchase 400 slaves, the ship actually arrived in Barbados on 9 May 1754 with 243 enslaved Africans on board.⁶⁴ Vassa claims he was in Barbados for less than two weeks before being taken to Virginia, and there is evidence of a ship that left Barbados shortly thereafter, taking slaves to Virginia for sale, arriving in June, which accords with Vassa's claim of being in Virginia only a few weeks before Pascal bought him from Campbell in the summer of 1754. On 21 May, the sloop *Nancy*, owned by Alexander Watson of Virginia, left Barbados under Richard Wallis for the York River in Virginia with 31 slaves, arriving there on 13 June.⁶⁵

The inference is that Igbo was Vassa's mother tongue. If it was not, he cleverly noted the distinctions that would later warrant linguistic study and equated these dialects with a 'mother' tongue, i.e., Igbo. But where would he have learned Igbo sufficiently to reveal such sophistication unless Igbo was his childhood language? In his discussion of language, Vassa concentrates on his level of proficiency in English as an adopted language, not his fluency in an African language, which is assumed. Vassa insisted that he only knew his 'African' tongue until he reached England. In fact he must have begun to understand some English in the Atlantic crossing. When his ship arrived in Barbados, however, it was necessary to employ interpreters to talk with the slaves on board. These interpreters were 'some old slaves from the land' who told them that they were 'to work' and that they would 'see many of our countrymen,' indeed 'Africans of all languages.'⁶⁶ When he left the slave ship in Barbados, he referred to his lack of English, noting that he lost 'the small comfort I had enjoyed in conversing with my countrymen; the women too, who used to wash and take care of me, were all gone different ways, and I never saw one of them afterwards.'⁶⁷ Hence it can be assumed that his command of English was minimal at best, and a few weeks in Virginia would hardly have altered this situation, even though he waited personally on his master when his master was sick. Indeed, he remarked that in Virginia, 'we saw few or none of our native Africans, and not one soul who could talk to me,' although in fact there were a substantial number of Igbo speakers in the tidewater region.⁶⁸

If he had been born in South Carolina, he would have understood some English at an early age, and could not easily have claimed otherwise. In London, Vassa had friends and associates who attested to the fact that at first he 'could speak no language but that of

Africa,' including Mary Guerin, his godmother, along with 'many others of her friends.' He also referred to Captain John Hill, who worked for the Custom-house in Dublin, Admiral Affleck, Admiral George Balfour of Portsmouth, Captain Gallia of Greenock, and Mrs. M. Shaw, James Street, Covent Garden, London, whom he said could testify to the fact that he only became proficient in English after arriving in London.⁶⁹ Vassa claimed that when he sailed with Pascal for England in late 1754 that 'By this time . . . I could smatter a little imperfect English Some of the people of the ship used to tell me they were going to carry me back to my own country, and this made me very happy. I was quite rejoiced at the idea of going back; and thought if I should get home what wonders I should have to tell.'⁷⁰ During the voyage, he became friends with Pascal's servant, Dick Baker, the son of the people Pascal stayed with in Virginia; Vassa noted that 'My little friend Dick [Baker] used to be my best interpreter.'⁷¹ By the end of 1757, Vassa claimed that he 'could now speak English tolerably well, and . . . perfectly understood every thing that was said.'⁷²

His friends and colleagues thereby testified to the veracity of Vassa's claim that he did not speak English, but they could not know if he was telling the truth about where he was born. However, they could confirm his claims that he had stated publicly that he had been born in Africa. Indeed in 1759, the same year he was baptized, according to *The Interesting Narrative*, he had 'frequently told several people . . . the story of my being kidnapped with my sister, and of our being separated.' As improbable as it may seem, he briefly thought she had been found while he was at Gibraltar later in 1759, but the young woman in question turned out not to be his sister.⁷³ In 1779 in a letter to the bishop of London, he described himself as 'a native of Africa,' while he said he was 'from Guinea' in the *Morning Herald* of London on 29 December 1786.⁷⁴ When Vassa subscribed to Carl Bernhard Wadstrom's, *An Essay on Colonization*, in 1794, he listed himself as 'Gustavus Vassa, a native of Africa,' and when his wife died in February 1796, the *Cambridge Chronicle and Journal* reported on 'On Tuesday died at Soham, after a long illness, which she supported with Christian fortitude, Mrs. Susannah Vassa, the wife of Gustavus Vassa the African.'⁷⁵

Vassa also engaged in comparing the customs of his own people with others, and these comparisons further attest to his Africanity. He observed that Europeans did not sell each other,

as we did . . . and in this I thought they were much happier than we Africans. I was astonished at the wisdom of the white people in all things I saw; but was amazed at their not sacrificing, or making any offerings, and eating with unwashed hands, and touching the dead. I likewise could not help remarking the particular slenderness of the women, which I did not at first like, and I thought they were not so modest and shamefaced as the African women.⁷⁶

When Vassa was on board the *Aetna*, he became friends with Daniel Queen, who taught him to read the Bible, with which Vassa was fascinated for reasons that again highlight his interest in understanding his recollections of his country:

I was wonderfully surprised to see the laws and rules of my country written almost exactly here [in the Bible]; a circumstance which I believe tended to impress our

manners and customs more deeply on my memory. I used to tell him of his resemblance; and many a time we have sat up the whole night together at this employment.⁷⁷

Carretta concludes that these accounts demonstrate that Vassa was beginning to invent his past, but I would suggest that he was making the comparisons that were necessary for him to comprehend his childhood in Africa and that would ultimately help him to convey its meaning to his readers.⁷⁸ Vassa compared the customs of his people with Jewish traditions, which is the first and independent tradition of Hebrew origins in south-eastern Nigeria, now a widespread tradition that was seemingly unconnected with Vassa's examination of common myths. Similarly, he observed practices in his brief visit to Symrna (Izna) in Ottoman Turkey that also brought forth comparisons. These reflections, in my opinion, reflect an astute mind. Why his birth was recorded as South Carolina when he was telling people otherwise is a puzzle, but the consistency in his testimony, in my mind, cannot simply be dismissed and certainly reduces the likelihood of fraud; indeed, a close reading of the available texts makes it most likely that he was born where he said he was. Vassa visited South Carolina several times in the 1760s but gives no hint that he had previously been there as a child, had family there, or that he knew anyone or anything about the area, which seems an odd omission (and only could have been consciously introduced in a manner constituting fraud). Admittedly, he may well have been the 'self-made man' that Carretta conjures up in his thoughtful biography. However, if he falsified his place of birth and the story of the 'Middle Passage' for political and indeed literary purposes, he advanced the cause of abolition, and ultimately emancipation, in a fashion that intriguingly mixed fiction and autobiography in a successful experiment in English literature. Nonetheless, it seems to this historian that the difficulty in establishing the literary license taken by authors has to be recognized. Generally, historical methodology is a process of assessing the evidence in the context of known documentation and other source materials, never trusting any document or other piece of evidence more than it can be verified. The degree of speculation and interpretation are matters of reflection. If Vassa invented his origins, as Carretta suggests, then he had to find a means of establishing his African birth without undermining what would be the basis of his credibility in his adult life, when his political image was significant. If he falsified his place of birth in later life, after confessing to a South Carolina birth when he was a teenager and when he was on the exciting and well publicized Arctic expedition of Constantine Phipps, seven years after he had purchased his own emancipation, but then subsequently suppressed the fact of a South Carolina origin suggests a degree of foresight that would honour the memory of the original Gustavus Vassa, who mythically liberated his people. The suppression of the 'creole' birth suggests a degree of consciousness that makes Vassa very clever.

The issue, therefore, is whether or not Vassa really was from Igboland, spoke the Igbo language, and otherwise had an understanding of that specific cultural heritage, at least an understanding the memories of it that can be attributed to a very bright boy of age 11. And methodologically, that means how much validity can be placed on such an account, which raises the standards of using autobiography as a source for historical

reconstruction. In this regard, details of every account have to be verified because of the implicit extension of context and interpretation. Hence, Vassa's relationship with Dr. Charles Irving is significant because it occurred over a number of years and reveals contradictions that raise questions that are not readily apparent in a reading of *The Interesting Narrative*.

Vassa worked for Dr. Irving several times, first as a hairdresser in London in 1768, before Irving patented his apparatus for distilling seawater, then as Irving's assistant on Constantine Phipps' Arctic expedition of 1773, when the device was tested, and finally as Irving's overseer of a plantation scheme on the Mosquito Shore in 1776, which was possible because of the fortune Irving made on his distillation apparatus. That is, the two men had an intermittent relationship as patron and client for almost a decade. While Vassa originally was Irving's barber in London, he later worked with Irving in turning seawater into drinking water. Why Vassa gave his place of birth on the Arctic expedition as South Carolina is not known, nor is it clear if Dr. Irving was aware of the deception, and if so, why he would have thought that the claim of a Carolina birth was important at the time.

Despite the documentary evidence from the Arctic expedition that asserts that Vassa was born in South Carolina, Dr. Irving must have been convinced of Vassa's African birth, because two years later, in 1775, Irving employed him in his abortive Mosquito Shore venture, precisely because of his alleged fluency in an 'African' language, presumably Igbo. Vassa's role in Irving's scheme is clear. With his partner, Alexander Blair, and a delegation of Miskitu, Irving first sailed on the snow, the *Morning Star*, to Jamaica with the intention of buying newly arrived slaves from West Africa, and for this purpose, Vassa was to identify who would be purchased. On 14 January 1776, at Kingston, in Vassa's own words: 'I went with the Doctor on board a Guineaman, to purchase some slaves to carry with us, and cultivate a plantation; and I chose them all of my own countrymen,' that is, they were Igbo.⁷⁹ Apparently, Irving's scheme involved the use of slave labour, under an overseer of the same nationality, which implied that slaves would be treated well, provided with provision grounds, and perhaps even encouraged to seek self-redemption, under the tutelage of Vassa, who had recently experienced a dramatic Christian rebirth.⁸⁰ Given the context, it seems that the scheme was based on the supposition that Vassa could 'recruit' through purchase sufficient numbers of his own 'countrymen', only 22 years after his own traumatic crossing of the Atlantic in a slave ship. What were the purchased slaves promised? Vassa interpreted Christian salvation as the road to emancipation. In 1759, he had mistakenly believed that baptism was sufficient for emancipation, and he was still learning otherwise. Irving wanted to use Vassa's ethnicity as a mechanism of social control, and for a brief time, Vassa agreed to be used in this way.

The venture was possible because British ships were trading heavily in slaves from the Bight of Biafra in the 1770s, among who were many Igbo.⁸¹ The slaves whom Irving purchased almost certainly arrived on board the *African Queen*, under the command of Captain John Evans, which had sailed from Bristol on 8 June 1775. The ship, owned by John Anderson, boarded 336 slaves at Bonny, although only

272 actually reached Jamaica. The first slaves were sold on 3 January, and the ship sold its last slaves on 3 February, leaving then for Bristol, which was reached on 22 April. There are no other reported ships from the Bight of Biafra trading in Jamaica in January 1776, although in that year at least six ships brought slaves from Bonny, buying an estimated 2,169 slaves and delivering 1,756.⁸² Although there was only one ship at Kingston when Irving and Vassa arrived in January, they would not have had to wait long for a ship from the Bight of Biafra, but it is clear that they did not have to wait. Irving's scheme to develop sugar plantations, using enslaved labour under conditions that would lead to the amelioration of their servitude, depended upon Vassa's collaboration. After he selected 'his own countrymen,' he would manage Irving's plantation, relying on his fluency in Igbo as the means of communication. This expectation seems to me to be convincing proof that he was Igbo. Where other than in Africa would he have had the opportunity to learn the language? Certainly not in South Carolina, where he allegedly was born but where there were few Igbo, and he was not in Virginia long enough to meet other Igbo, even though many were there. In short, Vassa had had little opportunity to learn Igbo other than in Africa, and he would have been of little use to Irving if he did not know the language.

Despite the importance of Vassa's relationship with Irving, it should be noted that Vassa did get important details about Irving wrong, claiming that Irving died from eating poisoned fish in Jamaica in late 1776 or possibly early 1777. In fact Irving was alive and well in 1780–1781, involved in the abortive Nicaragua invasion of that year. Irving recruited a regiment of Miskitu volunteers, and he surveyed the river that fed the bay at Bluefields to determine a possible alternate route for invasion and provisioning other than via the Rio San Juan. He returned to Jamaica, and did not participate in the final, disastrous invasion.⁸³ Rather than die of poisoned fish, he continued to live in Jamaica, dying there in 1794.⁸⁴ It is not clear why Vassa was mistaken on this point, given the deep friendship and dependency that had prevailed between the two men, and the fact that Irving's partner, Alexander Blair, subscribed to the first edition of *The Interesting Narrative* in 1789, meaning late 1788. Personal contact with Blair could hardly have avoided the topic of Irving's health, but the detail of Irving's death was not changed in subsequent editions. This distortion of memory is curious, if not deliberate, although for what reason is unclear – understandable if Vassa and Irving had a falling out on the Mosquito Shore. Irving's cryptic recommendation that Vassa records in *The Interesting Narrative* hardly reflects the relationship of the two men, attesting neither to Vassa's skill as a hairdresser nor to his role as an assistant in scientific experiments in the Arctic. Certainly, Irving believed Vassa was born in Africa, or otherwise how would Vassa have had the ability to select his 'own countrymen' for the plantation venture, which was precisely his reason for his being employed? Vassa's role in this scheme is important evidence in support of the fact that he was indeed born in Africa, as he claimed.

Although memories of youth are often cloudy, the reference points in Vassa's account are helpful. The geography of his country has to be deciphered; after all, he was only 11 and passed rapidly from interior to coast, and then to Barbados and

Virginia, and in less than two years was in the midst of the Seven Years' War and life at sea. He had a number of owners in a short period of time, including kidnappers, various masters in the interior of the Bight of Biafra, the captain of a slave ship, the Virginia merchant who bought him in Barbados, Campbell, who purchased him in Virginia, Michael Henry Pascal, who owned him for about eight years, and Robert King, allegedly a Quaker from Philadelphia who operated a business in Montserrat.⁸⁵ His longest period of subjugation was to Pascal, for about eight years, and then to King for another four years. Vassa's discussion of this history is what Gates has labelled 'the prototype' slave experience, but if anything Vassa's life as revealed in *The Interesting Narrative* is the opposite.⁸⁶ By comparison with most enslaved Africans, Vassa had a unique experience that ultimately allowed him to secure his own emancipation at a young age, to record his experiences and observations, and beyond that, to achieve leadership in London of a community of upwards of 20,000 blacks, mostly people of African descent but certainly including many who had been born in Africa.⁸⁷

Hence, Vassa was not a typical slave or a prime example of the slave as victim. He did not experience the field labour that was the more typical fate of enslaved Africans sent to Barbados in the 1750s. He was a servant, the attendant of an ill master in Virginia and then the personal servant of a British naval officer. In his captivity, he had privileges and access to opportunities that were not possible for most slaves. He was a slave for 12 years after leaving Africa in 1754, at age 11–12, until he was 24, when he purchased his own freedom in July 1766. He was baptized at about the age of 17, by my calculations – 12 according to the entry at St. Margaret's Church in 1759. During the Seven Years' War, he learned to read and write on board ship and then continued his education through tutorials in London, even learning to play the French horn. He achieved his freedom despite considerable obstacles that he describes well, but which on closer examination make his experience the exception in that the opportunities to earn money must surely have been unique. He was allowed to engage in trade on his own account, by which he earned his freedom in 1766, seven years after his baptism. If Vassa was 12 at the time of his baptism, as Carretta argues, then he would have been only 17 or 18 when he earned enough money to buy himself – indeed more than enough because, according to his own reckoning, he was repeatedly cheated and had his money and property stolen, and yet under these conditions, if Carretta's analysis is correct, then he was 19 when he was actually emancipated. In my reckoning, he would have been 24 at the time that he achieved his freedom, which even then makes his experience unusual if perhaps more plausible.

In his own day, Vassa had to face charges that he fabricated his childhood experiences. His answers to these charges at the time to some extent anticipated the questions that Carretta has asked about the veracity of Vassa's account of his birth. In 1792, it was claimed that he had been born in the West Indies, not in the British colony of South Carolina but on the Danish island of St. Croix. Stories were published in two London newspapers, the *Oracle* and the *Star*, which challenged him to substantiate his African birth, not on the basis of any documentation, but

only rumour. Specifically, the editor of the *Oracle* (25 April 1792) charged him with deceiving the public.

It is a fact that the Public may depend on, that *Gustavus Vasa*, 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. . . . 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?⁸⁸

These charges were spurious, with malicious intent, no doubt to undermine the abolitionist movement. By contrast, Carretta is cautious about actually claiming Vassa to have been born in South Carolina, but the thrust of his scholarship points him in that direction. Still, it is still worth considering how Vassa responded to his contemporary critics, because there may be clues that help to place the baptismal entry at St. Margaret's Church and his enlistment records on the Arctic expedition of 1773 in perspective. Hence the question: Was Vassa telling the truth about being born in Africa when there is documentary evidence that suggests otherwise?

The response of his friends and professional associates to accusations that he was born in the Danish West Indies is instructive, providing some verification of Vassa's account of his Igbo origins. In a letter to Thomas Hardy, the founder of the London Corresponding Society, with whom Vassa and his wife lived in 1792, Vassa wrote, 'Sir, I am sorry to tell you that some Rascal or Rascals have asserted in the news papers viz. *Oracle* of the 25th. of april, & the *Star*. 27th. – that I am a native of a Danish Island, Santa Cruz, in the Wt. Indias.' The tone of the correspondence suggests that Hardy certainly believed Vassa was born in Africa, and hence the reason Vassa wanted Hardy to get a copy of the *Star* ' & take care of it till you see or hear from me' – Vassa signed the letter 'Gustavus Vassa The African.'⁸⁹ Vassa was clearly concerned that gossip would adversely affect the sale of his book and thereby prove a discredit to the abolition movement. Indeed if his kidnapping, sale to the coast, and his rendition of the 'Middle Passage' were fictitious, then Vassa's credibility would have been compromised, which it seems that his critics in the *Oracle* and the *Star* consciously tried to do. Vassa responded to these charges on the first page of the ninth edition in 1794:

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 of 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.⁹⁰

This was a worthy response and should be remembered in considering more recent suspicions of his birth in South Carolina. Vassa never claimed that the details of the interior of the Bight of Biafra were entirely based on his own experiences. He specifically noted that his account was an 'imperfect sketch my memory has furnished me

with the manners and customs of a people among whom I first drew my breath,' and he acknowledged that he had gained information from some of the 'numbers of the natives of Eboe' he encountered in London.⁹¹ His discussions in London influenced what he wrote, just as his quotations from Benezet and other sources did, but the weight of evidence still indicates that Vassa had first hand knowledge of Africa.

It is possible that the details on the baptismal record reflected the good intentions of his godparents, specifically Mary Guerin and her brother, Maynard, who were cousins of Vassa's owner, Pascal, and witnessed various understandings and misunderstandings between master and slave. Vassa considered the Guerins his patrons, and he appears to have maintained contact well into the 1790s. After the charges in the London newspapers, Mary Guerin, by then, Mrs. Baynes, was willing to testify in support of Vassa's claim that he could only speak his African language when he first came to England. In 1759, as noted above, Vassa was already telling a number of people about how he and his sister had been kidnapped, and he most certainly would have told the same to the Guerins and Pascal too. In 1759, it is possible that the Guerins and Pascal wanted people to think that Vassa was creole born, and not a native African, because he had mastered English so well by then or for other reasons relating to perceived higher status for creoles. In any event, Mrs. Baynes, née Mary Guerin, later was willing to confirm Vassa's fluency in his 'African' language, that is, Igbo, as proof of his place of birth. This curious contradiction casts some doubt on the veracity of the baptismal record, which if considered alone seems authentic. Are we to believe the testimony of his godmother in St. Margaret's Church at the time of his baptism or her later testimony when his integrity as an African was in doubt? While Vassa's account of his African origin does not explain the registry in St. Margaret's, of which he was surely aware, he probably was not responsible for what was entered.⁹² Mary Guerin's later testimony casts raises questions about the baptismal record, which so far cannot be answered.

The muster entries for the *Racehorse*, in which Vassa himself was responsible for claiming a South Carolina birth, are difficult to explain. Could it be that as a freeman and the assistant to the noted Dr. Irving that he thought that a Carolina birth was more respectable than an African birth at that point in his life? After all, that was how he was baptized 14 years earlier. While speculative, Vassa's sense of identity in the years from attaining his freedom in 1766 until his involvement in the Arctic expedition in 1773 saw him drawn more and more into life in London. At the time, his consciousness as an African was set in the context of achieving a degree of British respectability, as reflected in his baptism, his self-emancipation, and his enterprise as a free man. The claim to having been born in South Carolina in 1773 may have been nothing more than an attempt to secure recognition as the assistant of Dr. Charles Irving. Certainly, later in life, Vassa resolved the issue of his identity and was suitably proud and public about his African birth. The testimonies of associates and the patronage of many of the leading intellectuals and religious leaders of his day speak to the authenticity of Vassa's many public statements about his origins. His confession of a Carolina birth in 1773, seven years after he purchased his own freedom, may have been an exception to his usual honesty, which was attested

to repeatedly in his own day. Why doubt Vassa's account of his birth rather than what he registered in the muster books? Again, circumstantial evidence, specifically his association with Dr. Irving, who was to rely on Vassa's knowledge of Igbo in the abortive Mosquito Shore scheme of 1776, raises questions in my mind of the reliability of what Vassa allowed to be entered in the muster books.

Vassa's life-long voyage was providential, or at least it must have appeared to Vassa by the time he wrote his autobiography. Many contemporaries, including leading abolitionists, seem to have thought that Vassa had been chosen to lead his people out of bondage, a mission which was reflected in the significance of his name, Gustavus Vassa. The slave boy, Olaudah Equiano, was the Moses of his people, not only 'his countrymen' but all Africans, whom at times he clearly included in his definition of his people. His identification with 'Africa' implied all of his enslaved sisters and brothers. As his Swedish namesake freed his people from the subjugation of Danish oppression, he would lead his 'countrymen' out of their bondage. Pascal had clearly intended the irony in naming his slave after the Swedish hero, and the parallel with Moses and the exodus would have been apparent at the time. From Vassa's perspective as a boy from an Igbo background, there was no irony in the choice of name, but rather it was his fate, his *chi*, to play a major role in the abolition movement. He knew the great British abolitionist, the Rev. James Ramsay, first in the West Indies, and then again in London when Ramsay began preaching against slavery on a regular basis.⁹³ He told Granville Sharp of the *Zong* affair in 1783, in which 132 enslaved Africans from the Bight of Biafra were thrown overboard alive in order to collect insurance from the underwriters. The scandal was a major mobilizing influence in the abolitionist movement.⁹⁴ He was involved in the first Sierra Leone settlement scheme in 1786, although in the end he became the spokesman for the grievances and failures of the scheme.⁹⁵ His image of himself, at least in public, at this time was as an African, signing with others letters and petitions as the 'sons of Africa' in various newspapers. By the mid 1780s, he was an acknowledged advocate and one of the principal leaders of the 'black poor' of London.⁹⁶

The baptismal and naval documents raise important issues, especially since 'Equiano' has been claimed as 'American' and *The Interesting Narrative* the archetypal 'slave narrative.'⁹⁷ In fact, Vassa spent only a few months in Virginia in 1754, and later visited for brief periods on ships trading to South Carolina, Georgia and Philadelphia as a slave, and then as a freeman trading to Georgia and South Carolina. As a free sailor, he also visited Philadelphia and New York in 1785 and 1786.⁹⁸ As a Briton, he displayed a keen interest in science through his friendship with Dr. Irving, expressed himself musically through his mastery of the French horn, participated in debating societies, most notably the London Corresponding Society, as one of its first members, and demonstrated his commitment to interracial marriage through his liaison with Susannah Cullen. Hence, the issue is not the validity of autobiography, whether something is being remembered accurately or being distorted for some purpose of obfuscation or political intent, but whether or not subsequent generations and scholarship choose to interpret ambiguities in a particular fashion. Vassa was a prominent historical figure, and it matters whether or not he was telling the truth about his birth.

Autobiography is not an accurate indicator of memory, and memory is not an exact replica of what actually happened. Autobiography can be used in the reconstruction of events that are clouded in memory, but to use autobiography as a means of understanding what people remember, and why, requires examining the details being presented in the narrative in context and checked against all available evidence, not just written documentation. The methodological issues surrounding where Vassa was born confront memories of slavery and abolition and their meanings. The fact that Vassa may *not* have been born in Africa is a significant detail that casts a shadow on the veracity of the eyewitness accounts recorded in his life story. The challenge of *The Oracle* that ‘*Ex hoc uno disce omens* – this one fact tells all’ foreshadowed recent accusations that he falsified his place of birth, even if for noble political motives. Sometimes documents may suggest that an individual lied, when in fact that may not have been the case at all.

Methodologically, the early life history of Gustavus Vassa, when he had the name Olaudah Equiano, raises interesting questions of verification and context. The existence of independent written documents that claim a Carolina birth conflicts with the personal testimony and ultimately oral account of the person whose place of birth is in question. On the one hand, the baptismal record at St. Margaret’s Church is difficult to explain, although there is sufficient error in recording Vassa’s name on the Arctic expedition to raise questions about whether or not anything recorded for him on that expedition was heard correctly by the person keeping the muster roll. Nonetheless, the existence of separate documents that claim a Carolina birth is difficult to reconcile with Vassa’s own account. However, the veracity of the documents, which seem irrefutable, is called into question when placed in context. The contradictory testimony of Vassa’s godmother, initially in recording his baptism in 1759, and then in 1792 verifying that he only knew an ‘African’ tongue when she first met him, raises questions about the baptismal record but does not mean that it was mistaken. But did he provide the information for the record? This is not known, but according to a number of sources, it is clear that he was not familiar with the English language until after he had been a slave of Pascal for some time. Only in 1759, at the time of his baptism was he able to ‘speak English tolerably well, and I perfectly understood every thing that was said.’⁹⁹ Hence he must have known what was being entered on his baptismal record. Similarly, he had to have said that he was born in South Carolina on the Arctic expedition; there is no other explanation, but what is not understood is why it was not claimed that he was born in Africa at either time. He clearly told the man he worked for, Dr. Charles Irving, that he was an African and spoke Igbo, and on that basis, the Mosquito Shore caper was planned. It is unlikely that Irving would have otherwise later employed him in a plantation scheme unless he had knowledge of Igbo. Hence, it is a question of when he told the truth, whether in his autobiography or at the time of his baptism and the voyage to the Arctic. There is conflicting evidence, and therefore the documentary information in itself is not sufficient to prove that he was born in South Carolina. Wherever he was born, he embraced his African birth, which affected his conscious development of an Igbo identity and his association with an African

community, but ultimately he was committed to a multiracial society, as evidenced in his marriage.

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. What appears to establish his place of birth as South Carolina disappear when the chronology of his *Narrative* is more carefully deciphered, suggesting that Vassa was likely two or three years older than he thought, not younger as Carretta has concluded. When all factors are considered, especially in consequence of what he reveals about eighteenth-century culture and society in Igboland, the most reasonable conclusion in assessing whether or not Vassa was born in Africa or in America is to believe what Vassa claimed, that he was born in a place called 'Essaka.' Hence his account of his homeland and the terror of the 'Middle Passage' should be considered as being derived from his memory, which he attempted to place in the context of what was known in Britain about Africa. As in other autobiographical accounts, the account of his childhood was filtered through additional information learned later in life, as well as reflections on what he remembered and how he attempted to understand his early experiences. That there should be variance in detail between what is stated and what probably happened is a methodological problem that faces anyone working with autobiography.

Acknowledgements

Earlier versions of this paper were presented at Colloque international/International Conference: Mémoires croisées: esclavage et diaspora africaine – Crossing Memories: Slavery and African Diaspora, Québec, Université Laval, 2–3 May 2005; the Harriet Tubman Seminar, York University, September 2005, and at the Department of History, University of Texas, 3 October 2005. I wish to thank Ana Lucia Araujo for organizing the Colloque at Laval, and Toyin Falola for the invitation to present my findings at the University of Texas. I have benefited greatly from the comments of James Walvin, Nath Adediran, David Richardson, Mariza Soares, Rina Cáceres Gómez, James Sidbury, Nicolas Rogers, and Iheanyi Enwerem, and the assistance of Neil Marshall and Nadine Hunt. Arthur Torrington has been especially generous in his comments and discussions. The research was supported by a grant from the Faculty of Arts, York University, and the Canada Research Chair in African Diaspora History.

Notes

- [1] Gustavus Vassa, *The Interesting Narrative of the Life of Olaudah Equiano, or Gustavus Vassa, the African. Written by Himself* (London, 1789). The edition used here is Olaudah Equiano, *The Interesting Narrative and Other Writings* (New York: Penguin Books, Vincent Carretta, ed., 2003), and referred to as Vassa, *The Interesting Narrative*, when citing the text itself, and otherwise to Carretta, *Interesting Narrative and Other Writings*, when citing other materials in Carretta's edition.

- [2] The mistaken belief that the publication of the *Interesting Narrative* preceded Parliamentary action is attributable to Thomas Digges, a contemporary in Belfast, as quoted in Shyllon, *Black People in Britain*, 237. Also see various testimonials published in Carretta, *Interesting Narrative and Other Writings*, 350–371.
- [3] Shyllon, *Black People in Britain*, 154.
- [4] Cugoano wrote *Thoughts and Sentiments on the Evil of Slavery* in 1787.
- [5] Ogude, *Genius in Bondage*, 131.
- [6] This is not to argue that there was a fully developed consciousness of ‘Igbo’ in the eighteenth century, or that culture is a static construct. Indeed Vassa’s use of the expressions ‘Eboe,’ ‘my countrymen,’ and ‘nation’ reveal a complex, and indeed sophisticated, use of terminology to address issues of identity. The idea of being Igbo in the eighteenth century is discussed in Northrup, “Igbo and Myth Igbo,” 1–20; and especially Byrd, “Eboe, Country, Nation and Gustavus Vassa’s *Interesting Narrative*.”
- [7] Ogude, “Facts into Fiction: Equiano’s Narrative Reconsidered,” 31.
- [8] Ogude, *Genius in Bondage*, 135, 137.
- [9] Ogude, *Genius in Bondage*, 135, 145.
- [10] See Carretta, *Equiano, the African*. Also see Carretta, “Why Equiano Matters.” For earlier discussions of Carretta’s position, see his “Introduction,” *Interesting Narrative and Other Writings*; “Olaudah Equiano or Gustavus Vassa? New Light on an Eighteenth-Century Question of Identity,” 96–105; and “More New Light on the Identity of Olaudah Equiano or Gustavus Vassa,” 226–235.
- [11] Carretta, *Equiano, the African*, xiv. Also see Carretta, “Why Equiano Matters.”
- [12] *The Oracle*, 25 April 1792.
- [13] Gates, *Classic Slave Narratives*, 8.
- [14] An obituary for Vassa’s son-in-law, the Reverend Henry Bromley, who died in February 1878, noted that ‘he had married Miss Joanna Vassa, a daughter of the then well-known, and still remembered, Gustavus Vassa, the African.’ The inscription on the grave of Vassa’s daughter, dated March 1857, reads ‘Joanna, beloved wife of Henry Bromley, daughter of Gustavus Vassa, the African.’
- [15] See Hodgkin, *Nigerian Perspectives*, 209–221; and Northrup, *Trade without Rulers*, on procurement of slaves, warfare, kidnapping, 68–70, 76, 90, 166, 168; on political organization, 90–91; trade, 94, 103, 160, 165, 167, 169–170, 172, 212.
- [16] Edwards, *Life of Equiano*; Jones, “Olaudah Equiano of the Niger Ibo;” and Afigbo, *Ropes of Sand*, 145–186.
- [17] It should be noted that David Richardson and I are undertaking a study of the slave trade in the Bight of Biafra in the eighteenth century; see Lovejoy and Richardson, “Trust, Pawnship and Atlantic History;” “‘This Horrid Hole’: Royal Authority, Commerce and Credit at Bonny;” “Letters of the Old Calabar Slave Trade;” and “Slaves to Palm Oil.”
- [18] Hochschild, *Bury the Chains*, 369.
- [19] Rolingher, “Metaphor of Freedom,” 90.
- [20] Gates, *Classic Slave Narratives*, 8.
- [21] Walvin, *An African’s Life*, xv. Also see Linebaugh and Rediker, *Many-Headed Hydra*, 243–46; 335–39.
- [22] William Langworthy to William Hughes, Bath, 10 October 1793, originally published in the 1794 edition, and reproduced in Carretta, *Interesting Narrative and Other Writings*, 11–12.
- [23] Carretta, *Interesting Narrative and Other Writings*, 289. In anticipating his critics, he also observed, in the opening sentence of the *Interesting Narrative*: ‘I believe it is difficult for those who publish their own memoirs to escape the imputation of vanity; it is also their misfortune, that whatever is uncommon is rarely, if ever, believed; and what is obvious we are apt to turn from with disgust, and to charge the writer with impertinence.’
- [24] Vassa, *The Interesting Narrative*, 64.

- [25] Roberts, *Gustavus Adolphus*.
- [26] Carretta, *Interesting Narrative and Other Writings*, 252.
- [27] Acholonu, *Igbo Roots of Olaudah Equiano*; and Afigbo, *Ropes of Sand*, 154.
- [28] Carretta, *Interesting Narrative and Other Writings*, 253.
- [29] Carretta, *Interesting Narrative and Other Writings*, 253. Usually, he signed himself as Gustavus Vassa or Vasa, the African, sometimes ‘an African.’
- [30] Carretta, *Equiano, the African*.
- [31] The plaque for Vassa’s daughter, Anne Maria, was inscribed in July 1797 on St Andrews Church wall, Chesterton, Cambridge, ‘Anne Marie, daughter of Gustavus Vassa, the African.’ I wish to thank Arthur Torrington for this information.
- [32] Edwards and Shaw, “The Invisible *Chi* in Equiano’s *Interesting Narrative*,” 146–156.
- [33] Vassa, *Interesting Narrative*, 31. Emphasis in the original.
- [34] Vassa, *Interesting Narrative*, 64.
- [35] For the controversy over the place of Vassa’s birth, see Carretta, “Olaudah Equiano or Gustavus Vassa?” 96–105; and Carretta, “Identity of Olaudah Equiano or Gustavus Vassa.” For views that he was born in Africa, see Obianuju Acholonu, “Home of Olaudah Equiano,” 5–16; Acholonu, *Igbo Roots of Olaudah Equiano*; Afigbo, *Ropes of Sand*, 145–186; and Gomez, “A Quality of Anguish,” 82–95. The debate is summarized in Hochschild, *Bury the Chains*, 369–372.
- [36] Carretta, *Interesting Narrative and Other Writings*, x–xi. Also see Carretta, “Olaudah Equiano or Gustavus Vassa?”
- [37] Cited in Carretta, *Interesting Narrative and Other Writings*, 261, n. 198.
- [38] See Carretta, *Interesting Narrative and Other Writings*, 286, n. 486, citing the surviving musters for the *Racehorse* (PRO ADM 36/7490).
- [39] Dr. Charles Irving was born in Dumfries, Scotland, the son of William Irving of Gribton, and died in Jamaica in 1794; see Maxwell-Irving, *Genealogy of the Irvings of Dumfries and the Irvings of Gribton*, 3. In 1759, Irving invented a marine chair designed to compensate for the motion of ships so that telescopes could be used to calculate celestial measurements. By 1770, he had developed an apparatus for distilling seawater and turning it into drinking water, which was subsequently tested and recommended for adoption on ships of the Royal Navy. See *Journals of the House of Commons* (1772), 660–663. The Royal Navy began using Irving’s apparatus in 1770, and in 1772, Parliament granted Irving £5,000 for the invention. See the discussion in Carretta, *Equiano, the African*, 137, citing *Annual Register* (1772), 98.
- [40] Carretta, “Questioning the Identity.”
- [41] See Carretta, *Interesting Narrative and Other Writings*, 62–69. Vassa’s reference to his first sight of snow also suggests 1754–1755, which was a particularly snowy winter in England. The name ‘Gust. Vasa’ appears on the muster book of the ship *Roebuck*, on which Pascal served, on 6 August 1755. See Carretta, *Equiano, the African*, 44.
- [42] For a discussion of Vassa’s age as a factor in his ethnographic reflections, see Afigbo, *Ropes of Sand*, 145–186.
- [43] Various details are discussed in Acholonu, *Igbo Roots of Equiano*, although it should be noted that Acholonu makes errors in quoting from *The Interesting Narrative*, and her discussion of generation length, kinship relationships, and physical resemblances between portraits of Vassa and individuals who may be distant relatives is questionable.
- [44] For a discussion, see Afigbo, *Ropes of Sand*, 152–154.
- [45] The suggestion of Isseke was first made by Achebe, “Handicaps of Writing in a Second Language,” although Achebe did not explain his selection. The identification has been argued elaborately, although not always convincingly, by Acholonu; see especially “Home of Olaudah Equiano,” and Acholonu, *Igbo Roots of Equiano*.
- [46] “Letter to the Honourable and Worldly Members of the BRITISH SENATE,” in *The Public Advertiser*, 19 June 1788, reprinted in Carretta, *Interesting Narrative and Other Writings*, 340, and noted in Hochschild, *Bury the Chains*, 369.

- [47] Ika was nominally subject to the Kingdom of Benin in the mid eighteenth century, and for this reason, Jones claimed that ‘we can locate his home with some certainty in the northern Ika Ibo region, which is the eastern part of the present Benin province’ (Jones, “Equiano of the Niger,” 64). Jones establishes northern Ika as Vassa’s place of origin because of the method for making palm wine, where it is made from oil palms, as described by Vassa, while in southern Ika, palm wine was obtained from the raffia palm. However, this distinction in technique applies elsewhere in Igboland and is not peculiar to Ika. Paul Edwards provided an early critique of Jones’ analysis; see *Life of Olaudah Equiano*, xviii–xxi.
- [48] Vassa, *The Interesting Narrative*, 32.
- [49] Benezet, *Some Historical Account of Guinea*. Benezet quoted at length various European observations of western Africa, but nothing on the interior of the Bight of Biafra, skipping from the Kingdom of Benin to Kongo and Angola in his descriptions and reports. He quotes some information on Barbados that presumably Vassa could have used, but not on his homeland.
- [50] Vassa, *The Interesting Narrative*, 32.
- [51] Afigbo, *Ropes of Sand*, 152, 162–163.
- [52] Acholonu, *Igbo Roots of Equiano*; and Acholonu, “Home of Equiano,” 7–8. This identification was also suggested by Edwards, “Embrenché and Ndichie,” 401–402.
- [53] Vassa, *Interesting Narrative*, 32–33 (emphasis in the original). For illustrations of *ichi* scarification, see Thomas, *Anthropological Report on the Ibo-Speaking People of Nigeria*, Plate XVII; and Adepegba, “Survey of Nigerian Body Markings.”
- [54] Acholonu, “Home of Equiano,” 10–11; also see Acholonu, *Igbo Roots of Equiano*.
- [55] According to Crow (*Memoirs of Hugh Crow*, 199–200), who traded to Bonny in the 1790s, slave traders avoided buying males with *ichi* scarification:

Of the same tribe and speaking the same language are the Breeches, so called from the word Breche, signifying gentleman or like Hidalgo in Spanish, son of a gentleman. As these had seen better days, and were more liable than their countrymen, who are inclined to despond when set on board ship, to take some desperate means of relieving themselves, and encouraging others to shake off their bondage, the masters of the slave ships were generally averse to purchasing them. The Breeches informed us that, in their country, every seventh child of their class when about six or seven years of age undergoes the operation, to distinguish his rank, of having the skin of the forehead brought down from the hair so as to form a ridge or line from temple to temple. This disfigurement gives them a very disagreeable appearance, and the custom is chiefly confined to sons of great men and our author never saw one female so marked.

Also see Edwards, “Embrenché and Ndichie,” 401–402.

- [56] Williamson and Pearman, *Igbo-English Dictionary*, 174, 379–380, 391; and Edwards, “Embrenché and Ndichie,” 401. It has been claimed that Vassa’s term ‘Oye-Eboe’ is *oyibo* (i.e., *oibó*), a Yoruba term for Europeans; see Chambers, “Significance of Igbo in the Bight of Biafra Slave Trade,” 118. Chambers draws on the account of Laird and Oldfield from observations on the Niger River in 1832; see Laird and Oldfield, *Narrative of an Expedition into the Interior of Africa*, vol. I, 394. It is more likely, as Alexander Byrd has concluded, that Vassa was referring to *onye Igbo* or an Igbo person, as accepted here. According to Byrd, ‘such a usage aligns with the connotations with which the term Igbo was freighted in the eighteenth-century Biafran interior;’ see Byrd, “Eboe, Country, Nation and Gustavus Vassa’s *Interesting Narrative*.” For the Yoruba term, see Abraham, *Dictionary of Modern Yoruba*, 459. I wish to thank Nath Mayo Adediran, Curator, National Museum, Old Residency, Calabar, Nigeria, for his assistance in clarifying this linguistic interpretation, which was confirmed by Iheanyi Enwerem, personal communication.

- [57] Vassa's reference (*The Interesting Narrative*, 37) to 'a very lightly coloured person,' or 'red men,' suggests the use of camwood as a cosmetic, which was rubbed on the body. See Afigbo, *Ropes of Sand*, 168–169; Jones, *Trading States of the Oil Rivers*, 31; and Acholonu, "Home of Equiano," 9.
- [58] Vassa, *The Interesting Narrative*, 37.
- [59] On the Aro, see Dike and Ekejiuba, *Aro of South-eastern Nigeria 1650–1980*, 205–206. Also see Nwokeji, "The Biafran Frontier: Trade, Slaves, and Aro Society," 73–75, 101.
- [60] Edwards came to the same conclusion; see *Life of Olaudah Equiano*, xxiv–xxv.
- [61] For the interpretation that 'core' referred to cowries, see Carretta, *Interesting Narrative and Other Writings*, 249; and Carretta, *Equiano, the African*, 25. For a discussion of akori beads, which were often yellow or grey, but sometimes blue; see Ryder, *Benin and the Europeans*, 37, 55, 56. I wish to thank Olatunji Ojo for this suggestion.
- [62] Lovejoy and Richardson, "'This Horrid Hole': Royal Authority, Commerce and Credit at Bonny," 363–392. Jones suggests that Vassa might have been sent to Lagos, but this is unlikely for two reasons. Vassa notes that many people on his ship spoke his language, i.e., Igbo, which would not have been the case if the ship had left from Lagos, and second, Lagos was insignificant as a slave exporting port in the 1750s, its ascendancy occurring in the nineteenth century, not the eighteenth. See Jones, "Olaudah Equiano of the Niger Ibo," 69.
- [63] It is possible that Vassa left from Old Calabar, rather than Bonny. The *Benn* of Liverpool took slaves from Old Calabar to Barbados, arriving 29 May 1754, but there is no record of a ship that might have taken slaves from Barbados to Virginia a few weeks later. For records of ships leaving the Bight of Biafra, see Eltis, Behrendt, Richardson, and Klein, *Trans-Atlantic Slave Trade Database*.
- [64] Eltis, Behrendt, Richardson and Klein, *Trans-Atlantic Slave Trade Database*. Also see Carretta, *Equiano, the African*, 30–31.
- [65] For this reconstruction, see Carretta, "Questioning the Identity." The chronology of ship movements is consistent with the alleged experience of Vassa in Africa, Barbados and Virginia.
- [66] Vassa, *The Interesting Narrative*, 60.
- [67] Vassa, *The Interesting Narrative*, 64.
- [68] Vassa, *The Interesting Narrative*, 62.
- [69] See Carretta, *Interesting Narrative and Other Writings*, 238–239. All of the individuals mentioned subscribed to the first edition (Carretta, *Interesting Narrative and Other Writings*, 15–28).
- [70] Vassa, *The Interesting Narrative*, 64.
- [71] Vassa, *The Interesting Narrative*, 68.
- [72] Vassa, *The Interesting Narrative*, 80.
- [73] Carretta, *Interesting Narrative and Other Writings*, 79–80.
- [74] Cited in Carretta, *Equiano, the African*, 3.
- [75] *Cambridge Chronicle and Journal*, 20 February 1796, cited in Carretta, *Equiano, the African*, 363.
- [76] Vassa, *The Interesting Narrative*, 68.
- [77] Vassa, *The Interesting Narrative*, 82.
- [78] According to Carretta, 'Queen played a crucial role in Equiano's later reconstruction of an African past,' although how this was so is not explained. Queen did help Vassa with his education, however. See Carretta, *Equiano, the African*, 82.
- [79] Vassa adds that some of those who were purchased were 'from Libya,' another interjection that attempted to situate Vassa's homeland in the larger context of Africa.
- [80] According to Vassa (*The Interesting Narrative*, 106), 'I myself . . . managed an estate, where, by those [ameliorative] attentions, the negroes were uncommonly cheerful and healthy, and did more work by half than by the common mode of treatment they usually do.'
- [81] The presence of Igbo and others from the Bight of Biafra in Central America is well documented, including references to Ebo, Moco and Carabali; see Cáceres Gómez, "On the Frontiers of the African Diaspora in Central America," 115–138. Some Igbo reached Spanish America through the *asiento*, held by South Sea Company until 1748.

- [82] The information on the ships carrying slaves to Jamaica from the Bight of Biafra in 1776 is derived from Eltis, Behrendt, Richardson and Klein, *Trans-Atlantic Slave Trade Database*. The *African Queen* is listed as No. 17866.
- [83] For references to Irving's participation in the invasion of Nicaragua in 1780–1781, see Stephen Kemble to General Dalling, Bluefields, 15 November 1780, CO 137/79 ff 129–132; Dalling to George Germain, Jamaica, 28 December 1780, CO 137/79 ff 139–142; Charles Irving to Dalling, Bluefields, no date [1780], CO 137/79 ff 158–160; Irving to Dalling, 18 February 1781, CO 137/80 ff 85–86; and Dalling to Despard, Jamaica, 23 April 1781, CO 137/80 ff 157–162. Also see Stephen Kemble, *The Kemble Papers* (New York, 1884–1885), Collections of the New York Historical Society, vol. 17, for various citations to Irving.
- [84] Irving, *The Book of the Irvings*, 86; and Maxwell-Irving, *Genealogy of the Irvings of Dumfries and the Irvings of Gribton*, 3.
- [85] For details on King, see Shyllon, *Black People in Britain*, 224–225.
- [86] Gates, *Classic Slave Narratives*, 8.
- [87] For Vassa in London, see Edwards and Walvin, *Black Personalities in the Era of the Slave Trade*, 16–34; and Shyllon, *Black People in Britain*, 115–166, although Shyllon's estimate for the number of blacks in London (40,000) appears to be too high, perhaps by double. I wish to thank Arthur Torrington for this critique.
- [88] The article also charged that Wilberforce and the Thorntons were 'concerned in settling the island of Bulam in Sugar Plantations; of course their interests clash with those of the present Planters and hence their clamour against the Slave Trade.' *The Oracle*, 25 April 1792; in Carretta, *Interesting Narrative and Other Writings*, 237. For the attack in the *Star*, see Carretta, *Interesting Narrative and Other Writings*, 238.
- [89] Vassa to Thomas Hardy, Edinburgh, 28 May 1792, TS 24/12/2 (National Archives), and reprinted in Carretta, *Interesting Narrative and Other Writings*, 361–362.
- [90] The passage was addressed 'To the Reader;' see Carretta, *Interesting Narrative and Other Writings*, 5.
- [91] Vassa, *The Interesting Narrative*, 38.
- [92] Moreover, the entry in the baptismal registry deviates from most of the other entries, which give full name of the child, usually an infant, as well as the first names of the father and mother, and the date of birth or age if not an infant. Place of birth is not given for other entries because it was assumed to be London. Vassa's entry reads 'a Black born in Carolina 12 years old.' The registry for St. Margaret's refers to the baptisms of other blacks, some of whom presumably were enslaved. Moreover, Ignatius Sancho was married in the church and his children baptized there. See Lalwan, *Sources for Black History*.
- [93] Ramsay, *An Inquiry into the Effects of Putting a Stop to the African Slave Trade*. For a discussion see Shyllon, *James Ramsay, Unknown Abolitionist*.
- [94] For the *Zong* affair, see Granville Sharp, 'An Account of the Murder of 132 Negro Slaves on board the Ship *Zong*, or *Zung*, with some Remarks on the argument of an eminent Lawyer in defence of that inhuman Transaction' [British Library, Ms. 1783]; On 19 March 1783, according to Sharp's diary, 'Gustavus Vasa, a Negro, called on me, with an account of one hundred and thirty Negroes being thrown alive into the sea, from on board and English slave ship;' see Hoare, *Memoirs of Granville Sharp*, 236–241. The murders had been committed in December 1781.
- [95] Braidwood, *Black Poor and White Philanthropists*; Shyllon, *Black People in Britain*, 150–158; and Wilson, *John Clarkson and the African Adventure*.
- [96] In addition to Braidwood, *Black Poor and White Philanthropists*; and Shyllon, *Black People in Britain*, see Gerzina, *Black London: Life before Emancipation*, 133–164; and Fryer, *Staying Power: Black People in Britain since 1504*, 191–214.
- [97] But contrast the approach of Gates and others with that of Edwards and Walvin, *Black Personalities in the Era of the Slave Trade*; and Shyllon, *Black People in Britain*.
- [98] Carretta, *Equiano the African*, 201.
- [99] Vassa, *The Interesting Narrative*, 77.

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