

1650-1850: Ideas, Aesthetics, and Inquiries in the Early Modern Era

Volume 17

Article 14

2010

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Recommended Citation

Angelo Costanzo (2010) "'NEITHER A SAINT, A HERO, NOR A TYRANT'," *1650-1850: Ideas, Aesthetics, and Inquiries in the Early Modern Era*: Vol. 17, Article 14.

Available at: <https://digitalcommons.lsu.edu/sixteenfifty/vol17/iss1/14>

“NEITHER A SAINT, A HERO, NOR A TYRANT”

Angelo Costanzo

Literary history is replete with all kinds of real and suspected fabrications and hoaxes. Some works have been proven false beyond a doubt, while others have kept their aura of suspicion down through the years. One can recall the eighteenth-century game that Scottish poet James Macpherson played when he claimed that he had collected and translated the great tales of the ancient Scottish bard Ossian, the son of Fingal, the King of the Highlands. While Macpherson was proven a literary fraud, the suspicion surrounding the true authorship of Shakespeare's works has never been put to rest. In the nineteenth century, there were instances of American writers who capitalized on the popularity of the slave narratives and produced dubious accounts of fugitive slave autobiographies. The 1836 slave account entitled, *Memoirs of Archy Moore*, was discovered to be untrue, and that same year an ex-slave work by Charles Ball was suspected of being less than authentic. Just two years later, in 1838, the popular American poet John Greenleaf Whittier published a so-called dictated autobiography, *Narrative of James Williams, an American Slave*, which was later branded a fabrication. In more recent years, examples of false writings abound. Many of these hoaxes are sensational works dealing with famous celebrities or notorious persons. One of the most glaring cases was the deception committed by Clifford Irving in 1971, who claimed to have written the definitive biography of the eccentric

billionaire Howard Hughes.¹ Another literary fraud occurred in the 1980s with the appearance of diaries supposedly written by Adolf Hitler.²

When considering these and other literary forgeries or dubious works of the last few centuries, one significant fact stands out. Despite their sensational interest and, in many cases, artistic merit, none of the proven fraudulent works is widely read today or regarded as a serious production of literature. In Shakespeare's case, a strong claim has never been sustained against his authorship; and there has never been any question about the artistic integrity of the works, no matter who might have written them. But there have been instances where even a hint of dishonesty or unacknowledged borrowing in an author's work has inflicted deadly injury to a noteworthy piece of writing. Alex Haley's *Roots* (1976) and Stephen E. Ambrose's *D-Day, June 6, 1944* (1994) are two recent examples. Both of these famous American writers' books have been tainted by accusations of plagiarism. Haley's work has especially suffered. *Roots* dramatically informed the American nation about the terror of its slave past, but the book is rarely read today.³

All this, of course, leads to the present investigation into *The Interesting Narrative of the Life of Olandah Equiano, or Gustavus Vassa, the African*. In his 1789 autobiography, Equiano wrote an account of his birthplace in Africa and the childhood years he spent there until he was kidnapped and transported on a slave ship to the New World. In light of Vincent Carretta's recent findings that shed doubt on Equiano's claim to having been born in Africa,⁴ we now need to deal with several questions that emerge from Carretta's unsettling thesis about a possible lack of authenticity in the first part of Equiano's narrative. Some of these questions have to do with the full extent of Equiano's borrowings,

¹ Stephen Fay, Lewis Chester, Magnus Linklater, *Hoax: The Inside Story of the Howard Hughes—Clifford Irving Affair* (New York: Viking Press, 1972).

² Ed Magnuson, "Hitler's Forged Diaries," *Time* (16 May 1983): 36–47.

³ Philip Nobile, "Uncovering Roots," *Village Voice* (23 February 1993). Nobile writes that Haley was not only accused of plagiarizing parts of his book, but of being hoodwinked by the West African Griots who told him what he wanted to hear.

⁴ Vincent Carretta, "Olandah Equiano or Gustavus Vassa? New Light on an Eighteenth-Century Question of Identity," *Slavery and Abolition*, 20:3 (December 1999): 96–105. Also, Carretta's "Questioning the Identity of Olandah Equiano, or Gustavus Vassa, the African," in *The Global Eighteenth Century*, ed. Felicity Nussbaum (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2003), 226–35; and Carretta's more recent work, *Equiano, the African: Biography of a Self-Made Man* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2005).

the degree of his religious sincerity, and the risk he might have dared to take in jeopardizing the abolitionist cause.

While some scholars consider it unlikely that Equiano purposely tried to mislead his readers,⁵ serious consideration must be given to the accusations of plagiarism and outright deceit made against him. Remembering what has been stated above about disgraced works consigned to the dustbin of history, I believe it is important that any questions concerning the validity of Equiano's autobiography be dealt with in a responsible and cautious manner. Charges against Equiano's truthfulness in detailing the events of his narrative should not be announced as proven fact until definite evidence emerges. To do otherwise is to cause a grave injustice to Equiano's classic slave autobiography and inflict irreparable harm upon both his character and literary work.

✱ Equiano's Borrowings ✱

One of the concerns raised by Equiano's narrative that must be considered was first brought up by Paul Edwards and S. E. Ogude, two of the early scholars who wrote about the extent of Equiano's reliance on other writers' works.⁶ It is certainly evident that Equiano borrowed

⁵ Responses to Vincent Carretta's discussion of Equiano's non-African birth have been put forth by Paul E. Lovejoy in two recent essays: "Autobiography and Memory: Gustavus Vassa, alias Olaudah Equiano, the African," *Slavery and Abolition* 27:3 (December 2006): 317-47, and "Issues of Motivation—Vassa/Equiano and Carretta's Critique of the Evidence," *Slavery and Abolition* 28:1 (April 2007): 1-5. See also Alexander X. Byrd, "Eboe, Country, Nation and Gustavus Vassa's *Interesting Narrative*," *William and Mary Quarterly* LXIII (2006): 123-48; and Robin Blackburn, "The True Story of Equiano," *The Nation*, 21 November 2005. These scholars find Carretta's evidence of Equiano's South Carolina birth significant but not strong enough to provide conclusive proof. Carretta admits as much when he states in his writings that we may never be certain of Equiano's birthplace ("New Light" 103). Several issues brought up by Lovejoy are discussed later in this essay.

⁶ See the introduction by Paul Edwards to *The Life of Olaudah Equiano or Gustavus Vassa The African 1789* (London: Dawsons, 1969) 1, xviii-xxx; and S. E. Ogude, "Facts into Fiction: Equiano's *Narrative* Reconsidered," *Research in African Literatures* 13 (1982): 31-43.

In considering literary borrowing in the eighteenth century, one must recall that writers frequently appropriated materials from various works without acknowledging their sources. This was a common practice especially in the popular travel literature of the day. Some authors mixed truth with fiction to give a sense of verisimilitude to their writing either to enhance the artistry of their work or to deceive the reader into thinking that the marvels they claimed existed in remote lands were real. Daniel Defoe's works, such as *The Adventures of Robinson*

heavily from his reading in contemporary abolitionist accounts of Africa, many of which he cited as sources in his narrative. However, while he credited the works by antislavery advocates Anthony Benezet, Thomas Clarkson, and James Ramsay, Equiano failed to mention many borrowings from other writers, especially the poets John Milton, Alexander Pope, and John Denham. Also, at times, even when dealing with materials from the abolitionist works he usually credited, Equiano did not always acknowledge every bit of borrowing that he placed in his narrative. For example, Equiano admitted in footnotes at several points in the autobiography that he took information from "throughout" Benezet's "Account of Guinea," or "Account of Africa." However, he did not mention Benezet as his source when he copied almost verbatim that author's long geographical description of the land divisions situated on the western coast of Africa.⁷

Equiano also failed to acknowledge from whom he received his ideas concerning the financial advantages that would accrue to the British Empire if the slave trade were replaced with a vigorous commercial exchange in manufactured products. That popular argument stated that an end to the buying and selling of human beings would usher in an age of Western influence in Africa that would instill in its people a desire for the advanced commodities of the industrial West. This line of reasoning had been presented by the British economic writer Malachy Postlethwayt in his 1757 book, *Britain's Commercial Interest Explained and Improved*. His proposal was reiterated afterwards by other antislavery polemicists, including Anthony Benezet, James Ramsay, Thomas

Crusoe (1719) and *The Life, Adventures and Pyracies of the Famous Captain Singleton* (1720), are prime examples of the borrowing usages of eighteenth-century prose authors. It is interesting to note that Ogude, in his essay "Facts into Fiction," compares Equiano's narrative method to that found in the above works by Defoe. For a full discussion of eighteenth-century travel literature see Percy G. Adams, *Travelers and Travel Lies, 1660-1800* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1962), 1-18.

⁷ The beginning of the second paragraph in Chapter I was taken directly from Benezet. Only later in the chapter did Equiano give credit in two footnotes to Benezet for some of the information about African customs and events. In Chapter V Equiano placed another footnote citing Benezet as a source. Given that he had been in America, Equiano may have owned the first edition: Anthony Benezet, *Some historical account of Guinea, its situation, produce and the general disposition of its inhabitants. With an inquiry into the rise and progress of the slave-trade, its nature and lamentable effects. Also a re-publication of the sentiments of several authors of note, on this interesting subject; particularly an extract of a treatise, by Granville Sharp* (Philadelphia: Joseph Cruikshank, 1771). However, it is equally likely that he was working from the 1788 London edition, printed by James Phillips.

Clarkson, and Quobna Ottobah Cugoano. The latter's 1787 book *Thoughts and Sentiments* was very well known by Equiano, who had probably helped to edit Cugoano's fiery attack on slavery.

Another example of Equiano's borrowing can be detected in the part of his narrative that described an arctic expedition toward the North Pole undertaken in 1773 by Captain John Constantine Phipps. Equiano had served aboard Phipps's ship the *Race Horse*, where he had risked his life to record in his journal the events of the voyage. He had been forced to write by candlelight in the powder room of the vessel, and at one point caused a fire that almost killed him and endangered the ship itself. When Equiano wrote about the polar trip, he probably resorted to his own journal entries because his narrative includes specific information of the arctic regions not found in any written source.⁸ However, there is no doubt that Equiano also added to his account by lifting descriptive passages from Phipps's published story of the exploratory journey entitled, *A Journal of a Voyage towards the North Pole* (London, 1774). Equiano failed to mention Phipps's work in the body of his autobiography or even in a footnote. It was Paul Edwards in his 1969 edition of Equiano's *Life* who demonstrated how closely Equiano had followed parts of the text in Phipps's record of the polar expedition.⁹

One may wonder why if Equiano intended to deceive readers about his firsthand knowledge of Africa and also about his "original" suggestions for ending the slave trade and his close reliance on Phipps's book, then why did he leave clues of his dependence on those who had written before him? One possibility is that this might have been a ploy by Equiano to place his readers off guard about any possible suspicions that might arise, especially concerning the account of Equiano's African childhood. An autobiographer's work that contains some documentation helps to create a sense of veracity and honesty that surrounds the telling of his story. This allows most readers to accept more readily as being true those parts of the narrative that were secretly invented.

At this point, one might ask the question if this is what Equiano did in order to have his readers accept the story of his African experience. Yes, it is true that he was an intelligent and clever man who tried to achieve his aims in complex and indirect ways. One of the ways, as

⁸ Paul E. Lovejoy provided me with this information in an e-mail note.

⁹ Edwards, *Life of Olandab Equiano*, xlvii-xlviii.

recently cited, was Equiano's commercial appeal to the leaders of Great Britain suggesting that their economic interests would be better served if they replaced the slave trade with an African trade in manufactured goods. Another example of Equiano's clever mind can be detected in his argument to the West Indian plantation owners that claimed they would receive more work from their slaves if proper care and treatment were given to them. Equiano had the opportunity to demonstrate the effectiveness of this practice when he wrote about the times when he himself served as a slave keeper. He showed how he was able to manage successfully the slaves in his charge because as he explained in his narrative, "I had always treated them with care and affection, and did every thing I could to comfort the poor creatures, and render their condition easy."¹⁰

However, despite his use of various shrewd methods of persuasion, it must be remembered that Equiano always had his intended mostly white and well-read audience in mind—an audience composed of both believers in and skeptics of the antislavery cause. The believers would expect a level of absolute veracity in his account and the skeptics or opponents would scrutinize every line of his autobiography searching for unacknowledged lifting of other writers' information. For this reason, one may wonder whether Equiano would have been so foolish as to play any tricks on his highly educated readers by using various cited works to mislead both those who trusted him and those who did not.

Another thought that should be considered is Equiano's well-proven fidelity to the record of fact. Edwards and Carretta have substantiated many of the historical, topical, and personal details mentioned in Equiano's autobiography.¹¹ Carretta especially has carefully and painstakingly searched out and verified most of the factual data in the narrative concerning dates, names, places, and events that Equiano wrote about in chronicling his life story. While there are the few inevitable discrepancies, most of the information presented by Equiano has been shown to be accurate; and this close attention to

¹⁰ *The Interesting Narrative of Olandah Equiano* (1789), ed. Angelo Costanzo (Peterborough, Canada: Broadview Press, 2001), 227. Subsequent quotations from Equiano in this essay refer to my edition.

¹¹ See Paul Edwards's introduction in his 1969 facsimile edition of *The Life of Olandah Equiano*; also the detailed footnotes to Vincent Carretta's *The Interesting Narrative and Other Writings* (New York: Penguin, 2003).

detail was probably the result of Equiano's regular practice of keeping a journal. His remembrance of how in recording his journal he had endangered his life aboard ship while on the arctic voyage is very revealing. From this incident, one might conclude that Equiano faithfully kept his journal going during most of his sea and land adventures. Many years later when he sat down to work on his autobiography, he probably had his journal in front of him, for otherwise he could not possibly have remembered with such sharp recall all that had occurred in his lifetime. The problem for him was that in thinking back on his very early years he had to rely solely on distant memories of himself as a child. Did Equiano actually recall what happened to him at that time in his life? Or for various reasons did he fabricate part of his African story or all of it? And because there is little if any evidence that can be checked about that early part of his life, here readers of the narrative are forced to make up their own minds about Equiano's work.

The thought occurs, however, that if Equiano's aim in the latter two-thirds of his autobiography was that he had to be as accurate as possible, then why after writing the first part might he have abandoned his pursuit of carefully presenting a true record of his life? The suggestion is that he could not have remembered much from his early days in Africa, and thus at this point he probably decided to forgo his penchant for presenting an honest account. However, one would think that if Equiano had started writing his narrative in a fictitious manner, then more than likely he would have been tempted to continue fabricating the ensuing record of his life's experiences. In that case, of course, the entire narrative would have become a hoax. This label we know certainly cannot be attached to the whole of Equiano's work. As mentioned earlier, the latter sections of *The Interesting Narrative* display Equiano's attention to a careful accounting of detail that has been ably validated by the groundbreaking work performed by Edwards and Carretta.

Another consideration might be brought to bear on the subject of Equiano's African account. Suppose it to be true that he resorted to creative fiction in relating engrossing but terrible events of kidnapping and subsequent slave experiences in Africa and on the slave ship crossing the Atlantic. This part of Equiano's narrative resembles a short story of adventure, suspense, and surprise. We remember the scenes of Equiano's emotional encounter with his sister and the idyllic life in

Tinmah the young captive enjoys before being cast into a harsher servitude. Then we also recall Equiano's journey to the coast where he gradually awakens to the realities of his situation as he observes there the crude practices of the men and women who have been corrupted by the Western slave trade. Finally, we see the slave ship looming before the frightened youth as he exits his homeland and enters the hell of slavery. If it is true that Equiano wrote a fictional story to tell a compelling graphic account, then the question occurs as to why this is the only example of fictional writing from him that we have? It is highly possible that a person with such imaginative powers would have given us more works of this nature.

We are then still left to contemplate two ideas concerning the early part of Equiano's narrative. Either the African story of his birth and life is true or perhaps it demonstrates how Equiano deliberately or inadvertently invented it for a combination of artistic and especially social ends. The account of an African origin certainly gave his antislavery work the weight of authority and significance required in the fight against slavery.

* Religion, Abolition, and Sales *

If we doubt the authenticity of the account of Equiano's African birth and childhood in Africa, then we must examine at least two more questions that arise from our uncertainty. One centers on Equiano's religious beliefs and the other on his devotion to the abolitionist crusade. First, how can we reconcile a possible lack of sincerity on Equiano's part with the professed adherence to the Christian tenets of truth and honesty that he repeatedly emphasized throughout his text? If he made up the story and lied about his birth and African experience, then it follows that his Christian devotion was not entirely genuine and that perhaps Equiano used his piety as a trickster device for "puttin' on ole massa." This scheme, as we may recall, was a common survival strategy that many slaves utilized in attempting to fool their white masters by pretending to be servile. It is true that history records the stories of many religious charlatans who for one reason or another tried to put one over on others; however, in my opinion, a close reading of Equiano's narrative does not seem to support the idea that he was playing with the gullibility of those he expected to assist him in the fight

against slavery. I believe that Equiano's conversion experience was sincere, coming about after a long period of trial and tribulation. His goal of reconciling his African beliefs with the various Christian branches of religion was achieved by him after he had undergone a deliberate and torturous spiritual process. Much of the narrative Equiano wrote can be considered an *apologia pro vita sua* dealing with an examination of the various religious creeds he had encountered through the years. And his attempts to sort them out led to much anxiety and worry for him until he became satisfied in his mind and heart that God's presence inhabits all religions, including his African Igbo beliefs, the Hebrew faith, and all the many Christian denominations he had scrutinized. Equiano finally chose Methodism because at that time it was one of the most forward-looking spiritual movements in England and America. An important draw of the Methodists was that their leaders and adherents were committed to social causes, and they especially fought hard in the struggle to end slavery. It may be remembered that the great Methodist leader John Wesley found Equiano's narrative spiritually inspiring and that he chose to read it on his deathbed.¹²

However, although we might arrive at the belief that Equiano was sincere in his religious expression and would not have wanted to cast doubt upon the reality and depth of his Christian conversion, most of us who read autobiographical works are also well aware that history abounds with the accounts of misguided or self-deceiving religious men and women. Thus, I believe it is wiser and safer to make a defense of the authenticity of Equiano's autobiography on grounds other than those based on his religious conviction.

Perhaps, a more feasible defense can be worked out by our attempting to probe another puzzling question that has to do with Equiano's strenuous efforts to abolish the slave trade and to end slavery itself. Would Equiano have placed in jeopardy all the good he was trying to accomplish by fabricating the story of his origins in Africa? He wrote the narrative primarily to support the abolitionist debate heating up in the British Parliament. His strong desire was to become, as was later said about him, a "principal instrument in bringing about the motion for

¹² For discussion of Wesley and Equiano, see Bryechan Carey, "John Wesley's 'Thoughts Upon Slavery' and the Language of the Heart," *The Bulletin of the John Rylands University Library of Manchester*, 85:2-3 (Summer/Autumn 2003): 269-84.

a repeal of the Slave-act."¹³ Equiano certainly would have been aware of the risk he was taking if he falsified a major portion of his abolitionist work. Not only would he have discredited himself, but he also would have inflicted great harm upon the entire antislavery movement. The question one may ask is whether or not Equiano would have exposed himself and his great cause to such danger?

Furthermore, it is a proven fact that Equiano was a talented entrepreneur. Vincent Carretta has documented the fact that Equiano certainly wanted to earn a sizeable sum of financial profit from the sales of his book.¹⁴ If critics could have given proof that his text was a fabrication, then Equiano would have lost quite a bit of money. His fear about the loss of book sales surfaced when newspaper accounts appeared questioning Equiano's birthplace, and of course Equiano was quick to counter those rumors and complain that they were harming the sales of his books. The money he could earn from book sales was important to Equiano, and he knew the risk he would be taking if his book could be declared a hoax. Evidence of Equiano's concern about this threat to his book may be read in the beginning paragraph of an introductory piece he first included in the 1792 edition of his autobiography:

An invidious falsehood having appeared in the Oracle of the 25th, and the Star of the 27th of April 1792, with a view to hurt my character, and to discredit and prevent the sale of my Narrative, asserting, that I was born in the Danish island of Santa Cruz, in the West Indies, it is necessary that, in this edition, I should take notice thereof, and it is only needful for me to appeal to those numerous and respectable persons of character who knew me when I first arrived in England, and could speak no language but that of Africa.¹⁵

In the next paragraph, Equiano asserted that the goal of his narrative was the lawful end of the slave trade; but significantly, the first thoughts

¹³ Thomas Digges, "Leter," in Costanzo's edition of Equiano's *Narrative*, 258.

¹⁴ Vincent Carretta, "'Property of author': Olaudah Equiano's Place in the History of the Book," in *Genius in Bondage: A Critical Anthology of the Literature of the Early Black Atlantic*, ed. Vincent Carretta and Philip Gould (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 2001), 130-50.

¹⁵ See letter, "To the Reader," in Costanzo's edition of Equiano, *The Interesting Narrative*, 255. This was the first instance of a challenge to Equiano's claim that he was born in Africa.

he concerned himself with dwelled upon his fears that the accusations of falsehood would diminish the sales of his book.

* **Equiano's *Narrative*: Hoax? Mistake?
Poetic License?** *

What then is one to make of Equiano's narrative? If it is a hoax, then Equiano succeeded in fooling many readers for over two hundred years. And, in light of the fact that the possible hoax was not discovered during the abolitionist fight against slavery, then one might label his narrative a successful bit of deception; a deception that he might have deemed was necessary to get his story read, and thus would be worth the risk involved. Perhaps, however, the idea might be entertained that Equiano was mistaken about his African beginnings and really believed his childhood had taken place in Africa instead of in America. Then what about the account of his kidnapping and slave ship experiences that he so vividly wrote about in the first three chapters of his autobiography? It seems unlikely that a similar series of events happened to him in America. Considering these possibilities—if the African part of Equiano's narrative was an outright hoax or if the remembering of a life in Africa was an honest mistake—how is a present-day reader to view his autobiography? Is Equiano's groundbreaking piece of life writing to be entirely dismissed now? Or is his account to be treated as a remarkably imaginative and fascinating work comprising both fact and fiction?

There are several considerations that can be brought to bear upon the thoughts surrounding the opposing views that Equiano's African remembrance might be either a wilful fabrication or an honest mistake. First of all, we must consider Carretta's attempt to demonstrate in his 1999 essay "Olaudah Equiano or Gustavus Vassa?" that Equiano must have been much younger than the eleven years of age he said he was when sold into slavery, and thus would have had difficulty in remembering his childhood. If Carretta's claim is true then, did Equiano, wherever he was born, decide to commit a deliberate fraud by imagining an African childhood in order to enhance the impact of his abolitionist text and to increase the sales of his book?

Paul E. Lovejoy in his recent critical work, "Autobiography and Memory," has challenged Carretta's conclusion that Equiano when kidnapped was several years younger than he states in his narrative.

Lovejoy has made a strong case for his belief that Equiano was probably born a few years before 1745, and thus he has asserted that there is a good possibility Equiano was around the eleven years of age he claims he was when kidnapped. If Lovejoy's line of reasoning is correct, then his calculations about Equiano's date of birth lend more support to the idea that Equiano strongly relied on his memory when he wrote about Africa. Furthermore, Lovejoy believes that valid evidence exists for Equiano's childhood remembrances of Igbo cultural practices. For example, Equiano's description of the *ichi* scarification rite has not been found in any eighteenth-century sources prior to *The Interesting Narrative*. Therefore, Lovejoy concludes it is highly probable that Equiano as a child in Africa learned about the significance of the Igbo facial marking practice that he someday expected to undergo.¹⁶

Another consideration concerning Equiano's African account focuses on a question involving creative liberty. Instead of acting in a knowingly deceptive manner, did Equiano, again whether born in Africa or somewhere else, feel he was taking poetic license when he constructed his African account with a mixture of factual events from his childhood and the information he had acquired from abolitionist works?

And lastly there is the thought based on the actual possibility of Equiano's birth outside of Africa. No matter how old he was, Equiano was a child when taken into slavery, and so the question remains whether he was so confused about his early beginnings that he mistakenly imagined the events of his childhood actually took place on the African continent and not on American soil?

We may also concern ourselves with the charge that Equiano deliberately made up his childhood story for abolitionist impact and monetary gain, but that idea might be difficult to fathom for several reasons. As mentioned previously, Equiano certainly knew that anything written by a black person would immediately be suspect in the white society of England, especially by those persons who earnestly supported the slave trade. He had to be careful that his account was authentic or else the anti-abolitionists would pounce on his work with joyful glee. This was one of the reasons Equiano inserted numerous letters and testimonials in his narrative that attested to the truthfulness and honest motivation of his antislavery work.

¹⁶ Lovejoy, "Autobiography and Memory," 323-27.

Those references not only alluded to the seriousness of his cause, but also revealed the threat to his work from the proslavery remarks that circulated in published tracts and letters. Equiano quoted from many of those attacks in his narrative. For example, in the preface of the second and subsequent editions of his book, as noted earlier, Equiano included the newspaper accounts that questioned his claim to being born in Africa; and in his narrative text he referred to and attacked the arguments raised by proslavery adherents. Equiano also wrote letters published in British newspapers in which he strongly refuted the ideas put forth by slavery advocates James Tobin and Gordon Turnbull. In Equiano's narrative, Tobin is named "a zealous labourer in the vineyard of slavery" (126). The letters Equiano wrote dealt meticulously with the points made by Tobin in *Cursory Remarks* (1785), a polemical essay against the ideas of the abolitionist writer James Ramsay. The proslavery concepts proposed by Turnbull in his *An Apology for Slavery* (1786) were carefully and forcefully argued against in one of Equiano's letters.¹⁷

As I have emphasized on this matter throughout my essay, the evidence then is clear concerning Equiano's frame of mind. He most certainly understood that if the slightest suspicion arose concerning the veracity of his life story, then the provocative autobiography he had written to fight slavery would result instead in inflicting severe damage upon the entire antislavery crusade. Equiano would lose any credibility or effectiveness he had with members of the black and white communities with whom he was working on trying to pass antislavery legislation. His friendship and influence with many of the abolitionist leaders in England, such as Thomas Clarkson and Granville Sharpe, would become seriously jeopardized. All this, of course, would not only destroy his efforts to bring about an end to slavery, but would also as he had feared ruin any hopes he might have had about making money from the sales of his book.

The possibility that Equiano might have decided to resort to poetic license in telling his African story centers on the well-known fact that in his narrative he inserted facts and ideas gleaned from the travel and abolitionist books he had read. No matter where Equiano was born, one

¹⁷ See James Tobin, *Cursory Remarks upon the Revd. Mr. Ramsay's Essay* (London: G. & T. Wilkie, 1785) and Gordon Turnbull, *An Apology for Negro Slavery* (London: Stuart and Stevenson, 1786). Equiano refuted Tobin in a letter that appeared in *The Public Advertiser* on 28 January 1788. He attacked Turnbull's proslavery ideas in a letter to *The Public Advertiser* on 5 February 1788.

wonders about what actually went through his mind when he started to write the early part of his autobiography. Did his memories of long-ago childhood experiences become so dim that he decided to resort to the information he had derived from contemporary books and from stories related by fellow Africans? Equiano might have borrowed the information he had gathered from those various sources to flesh out the cultural and geographical details he believed had made up the world of his childhood. He would have taken the vicarious knowledge he had collected for many years and interspersed it in his creative account of an idyllic African family life, the kidnappings of him and his sister, an African captivity, and the slave ship experience of the Middle Passage voyage to the Americas. Equiano might have justified this made-up version based on what he envisioned probably happened to him as a very young child in Africa. He would have done all this for the purpose of creating human interest and dramatic effect for his abolitionist autobiography.

This suspected practice of Equiano's imagining certain events and creatively elaborating upon others can be detected in many other personal writings. As is well known, recent autobiographical studies, particularly those by Roy Pascal, James Olney, and Philippe Lejeune, have pointed out parallels in the methods used by writers of creative fictional works with those used by nonfiction authors of biographies and autobiographies.¹⁸ Inventive devices are characteristic of both kinds of writing. This does not mean that writers of factual events are being untruthful or deceptive, but that elements of the lives and events they write about are shifted around, emphasized, or imaginatively reconstructed for thematic purposes or artistic effects. Recent biographers have even felt justified in inventing lines of dialogue and ascribing thoughts and feelings for their subjects' probable utterances and experiences.

If this method of honest creative reconstruction was practiced by Equiano, then there might be good reason to excuse Equiano's not quite factual re-creation of his childhood life and, in a larger sense, to give him credit for writing truthfully about what he thought probably

¹⁸ See Roy Pascal, *Design and Truth in Autobiography* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1960); James Olney, *Metaphors of Self: The Meaning of Autobiography* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1972), and Philippe Lejeune, *On Autobiography*, ed. Paul John Eakin (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1989).

happened to him as a child. Perhaps, when one examines the early story of his captivity, the question might arise as to why Equiano should merit such a generous treatment. However, when a study is made of other autobiographies classified as genuine works whose authors rearranged facts or summoned up their imaginations about certain events, a reader will probably find little reason not to give Equiano the same consideration.

✱ Equiano, Franklin, and Thoreau ✱

An example of a personal work that can be compared with Equiano's narrative is Benjamin Franklin's *Autobiography*. Published in the years after Equiano's book, the account by Franklin presents that much-admired central image of his arrival in Philadelphia as a poverty-stricken youth.¹⁹ Franklin is seen walking down Market Street, the city's main thoroughfare, spending some of his last pennies for three puffy rolls of bread, then eating one and carrying the other two under each one of his arms. In this passage the elder Franklin paints himself as a penniless, hungry runaway walking down the street and being viewed as an object of ridicule by the citizens of Philadelphia, one of whom just happens to be his future wife. Here the matter-of-fact description creates a sense of veracity that allows the reader to trust Franklin's recalling of the event and thus to believe it happened in just that way with the coincidence and irony of his future wife in attendance at the scene. Franklin plainly states that he is creating an image of his first entrance into Philadelphia for the purpose of setting up a contrast with his future life. However, it is only later, after one reads about his progress from rags to riches and from ridiculous-looking outcast to accomplished and respected civic leader, that the depth of Franklin's motive in embellishing the scene becomes clear. What Franklin did, then, was to take a simple incident and draw around it an elaborate image that served as a contrasting motif in his autobiography.

¹⁹ Much of this discussion is from Robert F. Sayre, *The Examined Self: Benjamin Franklin, Henry Adams, Henry James* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1964). See also the revisions and publishing changes studied by editors Joseph A. Leo Lemay and Paul M. Zall in *Autobiography of Benjamin Franklin: A Genetic Text* (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1981).

Franklin's method reminds one of the many instances of before-and-after images that can be observed in Equiano's narrative. The kidnapping in Africa and subsequent Middle Passage experiences related by Equiano in graphic detail stick in the back of the reader's mind and come to the forefront every time Equiano describes the many accomplishments of his later life. The attainment of his manumission, his learning to read and write, and his rise to becoming a leader in the abolitionist movement contrast significantly with the doleful happenings of his slave years. Whether or not Equiano grossly embellished the early events of his life is hard to determine, but there is no doubt his intention was always to emphasize for the reader the powerful contrasting images he drew in his narrative.

Another example of the practice of literary manipulation of events can be seen in the American transcendental work, *Walden*, published in 1854 by Henry David Thoreau. When Thoreau wrote about his experiment in living at Walden Pond that lasted for over two years, he placed all the events within the confines of a symbolic year. He began with his taking up residence on Walden Pond on the Fourth of July, his personal Independence Day from the constraints of society. Then he described his stay during the decline of the fall months and the bitterness of the winter days, and finally wrote about the elation he felt in the spring season when all of nature was in a state of rebirth.

Perhaps then we may consider it likely that Equiano managed his narrative to serve multiple purposes in the same way that Franklin and Thoreau cast the events of their lives. For his story to have a greater antislavery impact, Equiano probably knew that he had to place at its beginning an account of the experiences that tens of thousands of kidnapped men and women were undergoing on the African continent. Thus, to accomplish this end Equiano, as suggested earlier, might have taken the dim memories of his childhood in Africa or America and mixed them in with details he had read or heard about that described life in Africa and the brutal manner in which slaves were procured there. Equiano might have felt justified in imagining himself as a typical African kidnapped and sold into slavery. Perhaps, he felt that by placing himself in that role, he could give the reader a sense of what countless numbers of Africans were experiencing.

✱ *The Interesting Narrative: Mistaken Memory?* ✱

We may grant then that a writer's use of creative license does not necessarily indicate actual fraud or deception. In Equiano's case, however, the idea of deception leads to another consideration that anticipates a possible future discovery establishing with certainty Equiano's non-African birth. If it becomes absolutely evident that Equiano was not born in Africa, then the question will emerge as to why he placed himself on that continent. The answer to that question, as discussed above, might be that he honestly believed his birth occurred there; and when writing his narrative, he decided to weave a plausible story around his dim memories. A story derived in large measure from his reading and imagination. But what if Equiano actually knew that he had not been born in Africa? Why then would he have falsified his childhood account? As mentioned earlier, the possible explanation might be that Equiano had decided the abolitionist narrative he was writing required the inclusion of a story representing his character as an illustration of how thousands of Africans were being kidnapped and sold into bondage. In this case, Equiano might have felt he had the right to go so far as to purposely create a fictionalized account of his early days in Africa.

If this is what Equiano did, then he took a dangerous risk by resorting to this extreme use of creative license for the purposes of his abolitionist text. However, as noted earlier, it is unlikely that Equiano would have jeopardized the urgent antislavery appeal of his work and the financial benefit he hoped to derive from its sales. For these reasons, one's inclination is to support the idea upholding Equiano's honest belief in his African birth. A conviction he maintained and defended throughout his life, despite the few official records that stated he was born in Carolina.

Another thought might be entertained when dealing with the possibility of an invented account by Equiano. It is that one might delve into the previously stated notion that Equiano was confused about the geographical location of his childhood events. It is hard to believe that a person with such a sharp memory as Equiano's could be so disoriented in recalling his early years. However, if it is true, as Carretta has suggested, that Equiano was much younger than he said he was when kidnapped, then the possibility might be entertained that the middle-aged Equiano was unable to remember his location accurately. More-

over, one must consider that slaves were kept in ignorance about their origins and very few records were maintained about their personal lives. As a result of the difficulties involved in Equiano's attempts to recreate his childhood, he might have mistakenly thought the events he could recall occurred in Africa.

This idea sounds far-fetched, but there exists a plausible explanation for understanding how Equiano might have made this error. Numerous works dealing with the role of memory in the writing of autobiography have shown some significant differences between a person's particular memory and a person's recalling of that memory. In a recent study, John F. Kihlstrom describes a memory as a thing that "is to be encoded, stored, and retrieved."²⁰ However, memories are "things that people *have*, but remembering is something people *do*." A memory then is "not like a book that we read, but rather like a story we tell anew each time we remember." Furthermore, the act of remembering involves a quest for meaning "that goes beyond the information contained in the memory trace." This becomes "a process of *reconstruction* in which we blend information contained in memory traces with knowledge, expectations, beliefs, and attitudes derived from other sources." All this, of course, leads to memory that can be accurate, but many times it "can also be inaccurate, yielding illusions of memory, analogous to perceptual illusions, in which we 'remember' things that never happened." Therefore, frequently the process of reconstruction of memory results in errors and distortions in which "individual experiences will be confused, vicarious experiences will be remembered as personal, and the stories of many individuals will be conflated into the story of one person." On the whole, a person's memories are reconstructed "in accordance with theories of the self: our views of who we are and how we got that way. Each autobiographical memory then is part of a personal narrative, which reflects our views of ourselves."

In the light of all this, the puzzling notions once more arise as to how accurately Equiano remembered his childhood experiences and also as to what extent did he reconstruct his memory? Was his memory recall subject to all the acts of self-deception and false imaginings involved in the process of recreating memory? This question concerning

²⁰John F. Kihlstrom, "Memory, Autobiography, History," *Proteus: A Journal of Ideas* 19:2 (Fall 2002): 1–6. See also Daniel L. Schacter, *The Seven Sins of Memory: How the Mind Forgets and Remembers* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 2001), Chapter 6.

memory is one that can be asked of many other writers of autobiographical works, but unfortunately it is also one that can be rarely answered.

* Equiano, Certainties,
Possible Answers, and Warnings *

Concerning Equiano's memory then, several possibilities may be considered as to what might have happened when he wrote about his very early life experiences. The first is, as Equiano claimed, that he summoned up from his childhood memories the actual events of his days in Africa but inserted information culled from his readings of texts. The second possibility is that Equiano inadvertently reported remembrances that were not reliable because of the problems the human mind encounters in the act of remembering. This fact could explain how he might have thought certain events happened to him in Africa even if it is proven that his birthplace was really in America. A third possibility is that Equiano, whether born in Africa or America, used creative license to mix fact and fiction for the purpose of placing at the beginning of his narrative a typical and agonizing experience of what it was like to being kidnapped and sold into slavery. In this instance Equiano would have been following the practice of many other writers of life stories who managed facts to produce desired dramatic effects. Finally, the possibility has to be considered that Equiano knew he was not born in Africa, but nonetheless deliberately invented most of his African childhood story from his reading and imagination; again for the purpose of adding dramatic and moral weight to the impact of his antislavery book.

In any event, it is difficult to fault Equiano for whatever method or manner of writing he used to devise the account of his African childhood. However he did it, one must admit that Equiano wrote a powerful story that helped to accomplish the elimination of one of the greatest wrongs committed by humans in history. What is unarguably certain about Equiano is the fact that he gave his readers a graphic, fascinating, and well-told story of an African youth's entrance into slavery that was the all-too-common experience in the eighteenth century of tens of thousands of African men and women. For this very sound reason it must be borne in mind by readers and scholars alike of

Equiano's work that any sensational revelations about his important narrative should be strictly examined and not be declared proven fact until they are absolutely verified.