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Equiano's World: Chronicling the Life and Times of Gustavus Vassa

Equiano's World : chronique de la vie et de l'époque de Gustave Vassa

Equiano's World: crónica de la vida y de la época de Gustavus Vassa

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Equiano's World: Chronicling the Life and Times of Gustavus Vassa

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- 1 The study of individuals in great transformations places microhistory in a context that can shed light on larger events and processes.¹ The biographic turn in the study of the African diaspora is one such example (Lovejoy 1997; Hall 2010; Lovejoy 2011; Anderson 2017). In the case of slavery, moreover, biography is significant because it reintroduces people into the study of history. Too often the study of slavery, abolition, and emancipation has dehumanized experience, reducing those who were enslaved or who were resisting oppression to faceless victims or nameless rebels. The term “slave” presents such problems of identity and recognition. Its use in scholarship has tended to project the legal status and burden of the property relationship that underpins the control of those who bought and sold people as if they were things or chattels, thereby disguising individuality behind a cloak of oppression. The search for the individual, however, releases dignity and personality that counterbalance the exploitation that underlines slavery. This focus on individuals and their personal testimonies underlies the research that has been put into the study of people, including *Freedom Narratives*. *Testimonies of West Africans from the Era of Slavery* (www.freedomnarratives.org), *Liberated Africans* (www.liberatedafricans.org), *Slave Societies Digital Archive* (www.slavesocieties.org), *Slave Biographies* (www.slavebiographies.org), among others. In some cases, it has been possible to display the richness of individual life histories, such as that of al-Hasan al-Wazzan, popularly known as Leo Africanus, (www.leoaffricanus.com). There are in fact many digital projects on slavery, African diaspora, and Black Lives Matter, a few of which have been highlighted in *Enslaved*. *Peoples of the Historical Slave Trade* (www.enslaved.org). The three most important early and still extant websites that pioneered the way are *Slavery Images. A Visual Record of the African Slave Trade and Slave Life in the Early African Diaspora* (www.slaveryimages.org),

initially developed by Jerome Handler and now under the direction of Henry B. Lovejoy, *Afro-Louisiana History and Genealogy, 1719-1820* (www.louisianaslavedatabase.org) of Gwendolyn Midlo Hall, and *Voyages. The Trans-Atlantic Slave Trade Database* (www.slavevoyages.org), under the direction of David Eltis and associates. But since 2000 advances in scholarship are mirrored by the significant growth in the number of websites and relational databases that demonstrates the progress made since the early development of websites on slavery.

- 2 The subject of the project discussed here is the person who was born in what is now the Igbo speaking area of Nigeria and given the name Olaudah Equiano, and who became the famous late 18th-century abolitionist of the British slave trade, Gustavus Vassa. Although in his lifetime he chose to be called by this latter name, he is today usually referred to by his birth name, which is why the project has been labeled *Equiano's World: Gustavus Vassa and the Abolition of the British Slave Trade* (www.equianosworld.org). In focusing on the movement to abolish the trans-Atlantic slave trade and ultimately to emancipate the Africans and their descendants who had been enslaved, *Equiano's World* is an innovative approach to documenting the life history of a prominent 18th-century individual whose identity was not defined by the relatively short period of his life when he was enslaved but by his intellectual, cultural, and political stature as a free person.²
- 3 The enslaved boy named Olaudah Equiano came from the interior of the Bight of Biafra in the Igbo heartland behind the Niger River delta. Kidnapped along with his sister when he was about 11-12 years of age, he was hurried into captivity along routes that fed a substantial number of persons who spoke the Igbo language to one of two ports in the Bight of Biafra, in his case very probably to the Niger delta port of Bonny, where he was imprisoned on a British ship bound for Barbados in late 1752. He arrived in Bridgetown sometime in the late spring of 1753, where he experienced the horrific slave market to which buyers rushed the traumatized victims, grabbing those they wanted to buy. In his case, he was seized by a ship's captain who took his tormented prize to Virginia, apparently to the Potomac River near where the city of Washington would later be built. A tobacco planter by the name of Campbell bought him, but only kept him for a few months. He attracted the attention of a British merchant and naval officer, Henry Michael Pascal, who was purchasing tobacco from Campbell and who subsequently took him to England along with the cargo of tobacco. He arrived in Britain in early 1754. Pascal had intended him as a present for his cousins, the Guerin sisters, and their brother, but for unknown reasons he kept the boy, whom he named Gustavus Vassa, as his personal servant.
- 4 With the onset of the Seven Years' War, the young man found himself in the unusual situation of spending considerable time at sea, engaged in raging naval battles with the French that took him from Louisbourg on Cape Breton island in Canada to Gibraltar in the Mediterranean. His naval escapades were interrupted by serious illness which endeared him to his master's cousins and resulted in his baptism in St. Margaret's Church in Westminster across from the British Houses of Parliament in early 1759, where his conversion to Christianity was confirmed and his name Gustavus Vassa was formalized. The end of hostilities in 1763 did not end Vassa's servitude despite Pascal's promises to liberate him, and at the approximate age of 19 or 20 he found himself being sold to the Caribbean, where a merchant named Robert King, allegedly a Quaker from Philadelphia who apparently ignored the Quaker pronouncement against slavery, purchased him and engaged him in the inter-Caribbean trade in commodities,

including enslaved Africans. This ultimately took Vassa to a dozen islands, Charleston, South Carolina, Savannah, Georgia and Philadelphia, before he was able to purchase his own freedom in 1766 and make his way back to London and a most unusual life for an African who had been enslaved for more than a decade.

- 5 His life there was punctuated by repeated employment on merchant ships that took him to the Mediterranean and the Caribbean, and a scientific venture to the Arctic Ocean that was particularly unique. When a close friend named Annis was forcefully seized and re-enslaved, Vassa appealed to Granville Sharp, the noted British humanitarian who was to become his mentor and friend, in an unsuccessful effort to rescue Annis, who was subsequently murdered in the Caribbean in 1773. Vassa then came to the attention of the disgraced former governor of the short-lived British Province of Senegambia, who tried to get him a missionary post to West Africa in 1779. That effort failed, but Vassa's association with the emerging abolitionist cause was taking shape under the guidance of Granville Sharp, who would continue to be prominent in his life until Vassa's death in 1797. When a scheme was proposed to settle displaced and destitute Africans in London to the Sierra Leone peninsula in 1786, Vassa was appointed a government commissioner to oversee the migration, but he became disillusioned with the management of the venture and was abruptly dismissed in 1787, whereupon he became involved in a small group of prominent, well-educated Africans in London who called themselves the "Sons of Africa" and openly attacked slavery and the subordination of Blacks.
- 6 The enslaved Igbo boy who was known by the name given to him as a slave, Gustavus Vassa, now identified himself as African, sometimes as Ethiopian and ethnically as "Egbo", that is Igbo. He assumed a prominent role in the new movement, to which Granville Sharp was deeply committed, to make British involvement in the slave trade illegal, and in the course of 1788 prepared an autobiographical manuscript that recounted his experiences in slavery, which he entitled *The Interesting Narrative of Olaudah Equiano or Gustavus Vassa, the African, as Published by Himself*. He timed its first appearance for 1 March 1789 when the British Parliament first began its deliberations on the abolition of the trans-Atlantic slave trade.³ The release of nine editions in Britain and one in New York between 1789 and 1794 were influential in the abolition of the British slave trade, which was not finally implemented until 1807, some ten years after Vassa died.⁴ Because of the book's literary merit and its political significance it has remained in print in several popular editions which are currently widely read in English Literature and Black Studies courses at universities in North America, Britain, and Africa. His contribution is highlighted in hundreds of articles and books devoted to the interpretation of his impact.
- 7 Gustavus Vassa's rich literary account of his life-story, remarkable when we consider that he did not know any English until he was eleven or twelve, has been seen as the classic "slave narrative", and has subsequently shaped a whole literary genre of that name. This extraordinary recognition confirms Olaudah Equiano's historical significance and his continuing moral influence. In the early 1790s, the heady days when the influence of the French Revolution was felt on those interested in Parliamentary reform, the abolition of the slave trade, and the ending of slavery, Vassa was arguably the most influential member of the Black community in London at a time when it numbered perhaps 20,000, making London one of the largest "African" cities, if not the largest, in the 18th-century world.⁵ This is the man who has inspired the

development of a website which makes his digital identity globally accessible via the URL www.equianosworld.org.

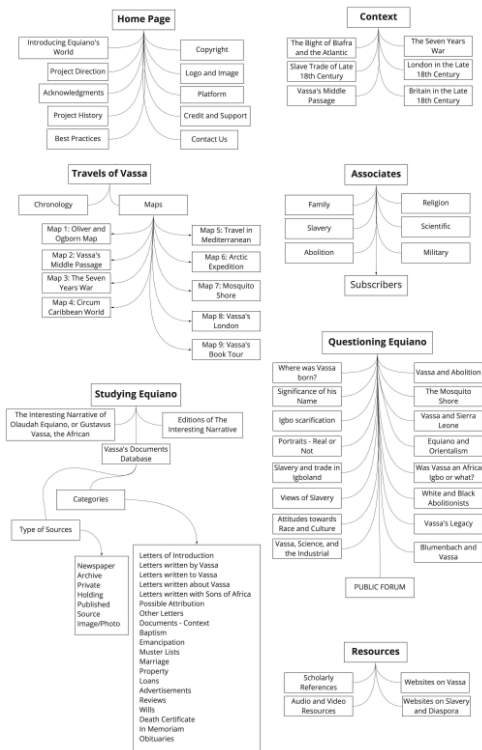
- 8 The website contains a considerable body of information, much of which is derived from the various editions of *The Interesting Narrative*, contemporary newspapers and other sources. In addition, there is an extensive scholarly analysis of different aspects of Vassa/Equiano's significance and his place in the period in which he lived. The *Equiano's World* project builds on this material. Considerable historical work remains to be undertaken, particularly on the relationship of Vassa to the Black poor of London, his friendship with radical leader, Thomas Hardy, who was tried for treason in 1794, his marriage to a white woman, Susanna Cullen, his commercial activities, his observations in the Caribbean, his involvement in the Mosquito Shore venture of Dr. Charles Irving, and his fascination with the Muslim world of the Ottoman Empire. The papers of the leading abolitionists, intellectuals, and political figures of the late 18th century, and of those who subscribed to the various editions of *The Interesting Narrative*, reveal connections across British society that are astonishing in their range and depth. The research being conducted on places and individuals that were important in Vassa's life lends itself to the extraction of new and meaningful information about him.
- 9 The origins of the development of the website date back to the first decade of the 21st century, although Lovejoy has sustained a deep interest in the man since he was a graduate student at the time Curtin published *Africa Remembered. Narratives of West Africans in the Era of the Slave Trade* in 1967 and G.I. Jones explored the early years of the Igbo boy, Olaudah Equiano, in that volume (Jones 1967). As discussed in the "Project History" on the website, Thomas Hodgkin had published an excerpt of *The Interesting Narrative* in his pioneering collection of primary documents, *Nigerian Perspectives* (1960), which was subsequently followed by new editions of *The Interesting Narrative* by literary scholar, Paul Edwards (1967; 1969), and Jones's annotated account of Equiano's boyhood life and enslavement in Curtin's edited collection of primary texts (1967).
- 10 It was therefore from the late 1960s that there was a huge surge in publications on Vassa's life and literary production, associated, thanks in particular to the influence of Paul Edwards and G.I. Jones, with his birth name. The Africanization of his name corresponded with the assertiveness of the Black Power movement of the late 1960s and 1970s but is not in line with his own usage. Furthermore Equiano, which Edwards and most subsequent scholars have chosen to use, was not a surname in Igbo usage. In his lifetime he never used the name Olaudah Equiano without also identifying as Gustavus Vassa, and he was not known by his birth name, as the extensive documentation on the website confirms (Lovejoy 2012).
- 11 By 2008, it had become clear that the extensive documentation relating to Vassa's life and times could be assembled for the purposes of constructing his digital identity in the form of a website that could reach a broad audience. By then, Paul Lovejoy, with the assistance of M.B. Duffill was researching Vassa's life, and with the assistance of Rafael Carvalho Slobodian, René Soulodre-La France and Yacine Daddi Addoun, created the initial website which was launched in 2010. This initial website is now archived through the *Internet Archive WayBack Machine* (<https://archive.org/web/>) and locally saved in Portable Document Format (PDF), both of which are accessible on the current website.⁶ The project was associated with the Harriet Tubman Institute for Research on Africa and its Diasporas, originally the Harriet Tubman Institute for Research on the Global Migrations of Africa, with support from the Social Sciences and Humanities Research

Council of Canada. In 2016, Lovejoy recruited a project coordinator, Bruno R. Véras, to develop a new website with updated information. Fernanda Sierra contributed to the design of the new website. Kartikay Chadha joined the team as the primary programmer and developer of the open-source website and associated databases in 2018, while Carly Downs supervised and assisted the production of new content in 2019-2020. The present *Equiano's World* website was officially launched on April 16, 2019, when Lovejoy presented the W.E. B. Du Bois Lectures, "Equiano's World—Beyond Slavery and Abolition", at the Hutchins Center, Harvard University.⁷

- 12 As demonstrated in the site map (FIG. 1), the seven sections of the website are displayed in the global navigation menu bar located at the top of every page. The website is divided into different sections that establish the context in which Vassa lived, explore the places where he traveled, and the people whom he knew. There is also a section that raises questions surrounding Vassa's life, ranging from where he was born to his views on race and slavery, and hosts a forum for discussion and queries. Studying Equiano provides access to primary documents, published scholarly analysis, and web links relevant to the times and places of Vassa's life. Taken together, *Equiano's World* is an adventure into the history of abolition, accessible to scholars, students, and the interested public. The project direction and acknowledgments identify the intellectual and technical contributions of over forty individuals whose inputs during the past two decades underlie the website.
- 13 *Equiano's World* is organized in a manner that allows users to access specific information, including a list of the various editions of *The Interesting Narrative*, a bibliography of publications about Vassa and his work, materials that can be useful for teaching purposes, background information on his associates, and a list of those who subscribed to the different editions of his autobiography. The different sections of the website are labeled "Context," "Travels of Vassa," "Associates of Vassa," "Questioning Equiano," "Studying Equiano," and "Resources". A distinction is consciously made between references to the man from his teenage years until his death when he was known as Gustavus Vassa and to the popularized reference to him as Olaudah Equiano, or even Equiano.
- 14 To understand the world that Vassa lived in, his role in the abolition movement, and his perception of the notorious "Middle Passage", as indeed his exploration of different religions, it is essential to establish a context for each of these. His autobiography reflects his understanding and misunderstandings, which can sometimes cloud our appreciation of his evolution as an intellectual and political activist. That Vassa's slavery overlapped with the Seven Years' War requires an understanding of where he was and when his risky adventures had an impact on him. His involvement in the first Sierra Leone colonization scheme in 1786-87 clarified his commitment to the abolition of the slave trade and subsequently resulted in his writing his autobiography in 1788. His book-selling tours of Britain over the next several years were instrumental in garnering public support for abolition. The outbreak of war with Revolutionary France temporarily sidelined the abolition campaign, redirecting political action towards the expansion of the expansion of eligibility for the British electorate rather than the issue of slavery. Consequently, Vassa never lived to see abolition; it was implemented only in 1807, ten years after his premature death, while the emancipation of slaves in British colonies was not realized until 1834. Nonetheless, the importance of his autobiography

in the movement to abolish the slave trade and ultimately in ending slavery is a key element in understanding the life and times identified on the website, *Equiano's World*.

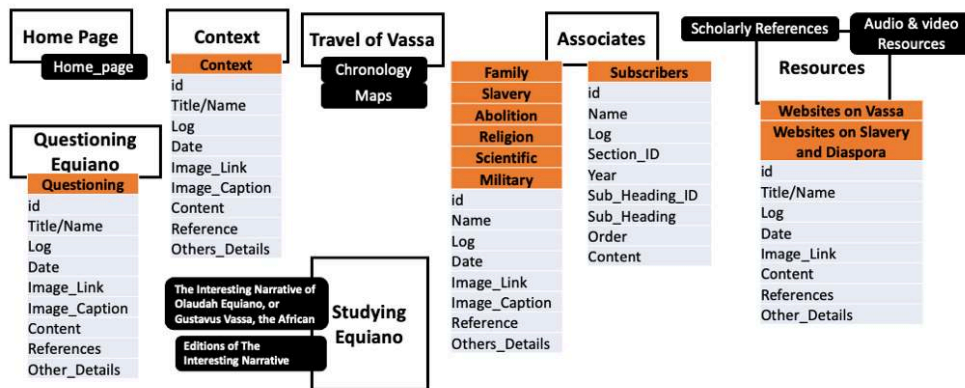
FIGURE 1. *Equiano's World* Site Map



- 15 The section on "Context" includes brief discussions of the Bight of Biafra and its interior where he was born and from where he was taken before his sale to a British ship. The discussion includes an account of the slave trade of the late 18th century, at a time when Britain was the most important slave-trading nation involved in transferring enslaved Africans to the Americas. British domination of the trade of the Bight of Biafra was particularly significant and virtually guaranteed that everyone left one of its two main ports, Bonny and Calabar, and would initially at least end up in a British colony in the Americas, as was Vassa's case. His discussion of the Middle Passage was particularly influential because of his role in the abolition movement. His testimony and his public lectures were central to raising public awareness in Britain about the horrors of the slave trade. Vassa's stint in the Seven Years' War, even though he was a slave to a British naval officer, touched a patriotic nerve in Britain at the time he published *The Interesting Narrative* in 1789, because at that date Britain was still smarting from its defeat in the War of American Independence. The discussion of British America brings essential context to bear because Vassa provided almost no commentary on the political history of British colonies in the Caribbean and North America, and he was virtually silent on the independence of the thirteen North American colonies that came to form the United States. The reconstruction of Vassa's London in the last half of the 18th century documents the period before urban renewal restructured much of the west end of greater London, when Trafalgar Square was laid out and many of the poorer parts of Soho and Haymarket were demolished. This was the setting for the abolition movement that figured so heavily in Vassa's life. The discussion of Britain in the late 18th century is intended to provide an overview of the

industrializing areas that Vassa visited as well as those parts of Scotland and Ireland where he travelled.

- 16 The section entitled “Travels of Vassa” takes the viewer through the chronology of his life, dividing it into nine main periods illustrated by as many maps, and includes an overview of his extensive travels from Africa to the Americas and on to Europe, the Arctic and the Mediterranean. Other maps show his Middle Passage from the interior of the Bight of Biafra to Barbados and Virginia before re-crossing the Atlantic to England. The Seven Years War map displays the main battles he was in and other locations, while the map of the circum-Caribbean world indicates where he went in the Caribbean and North America. Chronologically, his European and Mediterranean travels brought him back to places where he had been stationed in the Seven Years War, but was now a seaman on commercial vessels that took him as far east as the Ottoman port of Smyrna, today Isna, on the Anatolian Peninsula. He then travelled to the Arctic beyond the Svalbard archipelago north of Norway, a chilling contrast to the Mosquito Shore of Central America. Except for voyages to Philadelphia and New York in the newly independent United States, he remained in Britain for the rest of his life, living mostly at various addresses in London and from 1789 traveling widely in England, Scotland, and Ireland in the course of his book tour to lecture and sell his autobiography.
- 17 Gustavus Vassa was acquainted with several prominent individuals, and he probably knew others even though there is no documentary evidence. The section on “Associates” highlights the individuals he knew or may have known. It is divided into seven categories: first, his family, including his Igbo parents and siblings as well as his wife and two daughters; second, his slavery associates, identifying many of the individuals whom he knew when he was enslaved; third, those with whom he associated during the abolition campaign, highlighting the major figures who were prominent in the abolition movement in the late 18th century as well as some of the slave merchants and slave owners who opposed abolition; fourth, his religious affiliations focus on those he knew or probably knew in the Huntingdonian Connexion, as well as Quakers and Anglicans with whom he interacted; fifth, his involvement in the Seven Years’ War associated him with various naval officers initially through his enslavement to Captain Michael Henry Pascal; sixth, his involvement in the activities of Dr. Charles Irving and Irving’s associates brought him into contact with the scientific community; seventh, the lists of subscribers to one or more copies of *The Interesting Narrative* uncovers a wide network of individuals associated with abolition who undoubtedly made Vassa and his story very well known. The database scheme for the “Subscribers” section (FIG. 2) captures three levels of data organization: the menu options (Name and Section ID), the subheading (Sub Heading and Sub_Heading_ID), and bucket sections based on alphabetical order (Order). The interface allows users to navigate and search through a list of subscribers, which has been curated and organized in over 75 pages of PDF documentation.

FIGURE 2. Entity-Relationship (ER) Diagram for *Equiano's World* Website

- 18 Numerous questions have arisen in terms of what Gustavus Vassa knew, what he did, and what he thought. The section called “Questioning Equiano” includes a discussion of where Vassa was born, the significance of his name, Igbo scarification and body markings, slavery, and trade in Igboland, Vassa’s views of slavery and his attitudes toward race and culture. There is also discussion of his relations with scientists and the industrial revolution, his recognized and unrecognized involvement in the abolition movement, his connection with the Mosquito Shore of Central America and with Sierra Leone, of his relationship with the German anthropologist Johann Friedrich Blumenbach, and of his legacy. Finally, there is a “Forum” that allows public interaction via the website on issues that are not otherwise covered but which the website and the study of the topics related to Vassa and the abolition movement may have prompted.
- 19 The section called “Studying Equiano” provides access to key documents and other primary source materials. This section features a full text of the first, ninth, and 1837 editions of *The Interesting Narrative*, as well as a list of other editions including those translated into German, Dutch, French, Russian, Italian, Spanish, and Hebrew, with anticipated translations into Igbo and Portuguese. The “Documentation Database” includes PDF copies of letters written by Vassa both published and unpublished, as well as important documents such as his baptismal record, marriage certificate, will, lease for Plaisterers’ Hall, and much more. Transcriptions of all documentation are provided for easy search. The “Resources” section includes a comprehensive bibliography of several hundred scholarly publications and unpublished theses used in the development of the *Equiano’s World* project, as well as links to video and audio resources, and relevant websites. The literary merit of Vassa’s autobiography has inspired a critical debate that has continued to the present and is highlighted on the website through an extensive list of scholarly references. Vassa’s observations on his memories of Africa and his subsequent enslavement and role in the movement to abolish the slave trade have informed historical analysis and prompted a debate, sometimes heated, over how to interpret his account and his influence.
- 20 The project clearly articulates “Best Practices” that include recognition of those who have contributed to the research, the construction of a database, and the

implementation of a website as a mechanism for dissemination of new knowledge. The *Equiano's World* website is an open-source, database-driven, online digital repository created at the Harriet Tubman Institute for Research on Africa and its Diasporas at York University. *Equiano's World* respects "Best Practices" as developed in the course of generating the website and associated databases. In addition to the identification of the specific contributions of the Research Team and Web Development team, these "Best Practices" include a description of the methodology employed in the collection and production of web content. Since 2008, archival research has been conducted for the curation of content matters at archives located in Britain, Nigeria, Nicaragua, and the United States, including newspapers, Parliamentary papers, contemporary publications, church records, and other sources. Digital scanned versions of these documents have been deposited into a local repository, which is reviewed, organized, meta-tagged, and uploaded to *Equiano's World* database following web-development guidelines. The intention is, however, to permit viewers to access relevant documentation, not to create a digital archive.

- 21 All sources are referenced using the Chicago reference style. The digital files on the website are optimized for easy access on lower bandwidth internet; the website explicitly credits the artist and/or photographers, and the gallery, archive, or location where the content is housed. The image files are saved in a compressed image format standardized by the Joint Photographic Experts Group (JPEG) and every text or scanned document is uploaded in a Portable Document Format (PDF). Every image and file on the website are passed through an in-house developed Photoshop treatment protocol and is then tested to pass digital optimization requirements before moving to the production stage. Most historical images displayed on this website were created in the 18th and 19th centuries and are considered in the public domain under the "Fair Use" clause as recognized in most countries. The goal of *Equiano's World* is to disseminate knowledge based on scholarly analysis of primary sources related to the historical slave trade, and the struggle for freedom from slavery.
- 22 *Equiano's World* is a non-commercial and educational digital resource. The project does not own rights to materials held in this digital database and does not license or charge fees for the use of materials. The website relies on either in-house developed algorithms or open-source programming classes, and external plugins that are licensed under free, open-source software licenses such as the MIT license and the GNU General Public License series. As a permissive license, it puts very limited restrictions on reuse and has, therefore, high license compatibility. All elements of the project website are intended for open access in the public domain and acknowledgment should be clearly stated as described under the Copyright section of the Home page. Conditions of use of content from the website and its images, design, or texts should be provided with appropriate attribution providing bibliographic information. *Equiano's World* is the part of digital hub, Studies in the History of the African Diaspora—Documents (SHADD) (www.shadd.org) at York University.
- 23 The design of www.equianosworld.org aims to provide researchers and the general public with a clean, accessible, and fluid layout. The visual identity of the site highlights important moments in the life of Gustavus Vassa. In implementing this concept, we created a circular logo placing Vassa's silhouette at the center with the cover of his autobiography as the background. This silhouette was adapted from William Denton and Daniel Orme's portrait entitled *Equiano* made in 1789 for the

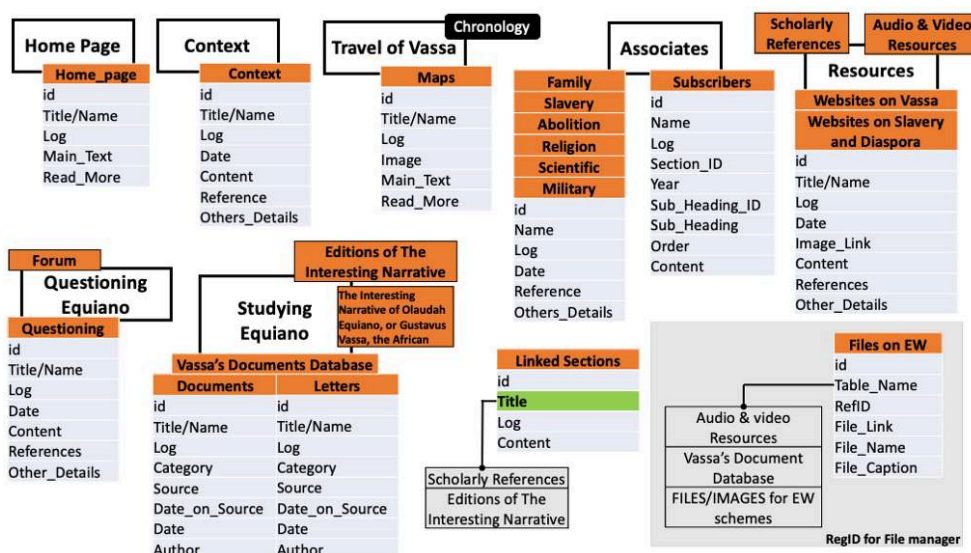
frontispiece of his autobiography. The two letters on the side of the logo stand for *Equiano's World*. The font was developed using his original handwriting. The logo was designed by Fernanda Sierra Suarez, inspired by the logo used on the original website, developed in 2008.

- 24 Equiano's digital identity, in the form of this website, is a harmonized balance between multiple programming languages implementing various computer algorithms. The user front-end of this website is developed in HTML using the Bootstrap 4.0 framework, a front-end open-source toolkit, featuring Sass variables and mix-ins, responsive grid system, extensive pre-built components, and powerful JavaScript plugins. The backend database is developed in MySQL, an open-source relational database management system.⁸ The website codes comprise a combination of both static HTML pages and/or PHP scripts allowing communication between the front end of the website and the MySQL database. Currently, the programming file system exists on SHADD managed server hosted by Godaddy Inc. shared hosting services, running on a Linux operating system handled by cPanel version 78.0 (build 49), and operating PHP version 5.6.40 and MySQL version 5.6.47-cll-lve (as of July 4, 2020).
- 25 As part of the SHADD hub, *Equiano's World* relies on Walk With Web Inc. (WWW, www.walkwithweb.org), which provides development services, support, and preservation plans to digital humanities research projects. WWW has a digital content management service called Regenerated Identities (RegID, www.regeneratedidentities.org), which supports the development, deployment, and long-term maintenance of digital research in North America, Europe, the Caribbean, Latin America, and Africa. RegID provides a custom graphical user interface that allows user-based management of *Equiano's World* website and database, handing over some control of the online publication to the researchers. RegID toolkit cover three technical aspects of the project: 1) digital curation, organization, and meta-tagging of documents, letters and other types of manuscripts, 2) giving control to historians to self-publish information on the website, and 3) web security and management of on-going version updates of tools and software supporting the web presence of the project for long-term sustainability. *Equiano's World* on RegID is supported by similar or upgraded versions of programming languages and toolkits used to develop the frontend website. The web-interface of RegID uses an open-source admin dashboard theme created by Blackrock Digital LLC. The codes of this theme were released under the MIT License on January 14, 2014.
- 26 As the Entity-Relationship (ER) diagram, FIG. 2, demonstrates, the website initially comprised static text that was used to develop a dynamic website that works with a database. These sections are shown in the Rounded edge black color box. Subsequently, this structure was upgraded into database schemes through the implementation of the RegID toolkit, as shown in FIG. 3. The database on the SHADD server in real-time is managed and supported on Regenerated Identities and Walk With Web servers, respectively. The database is split into two sections, the first deals with the textual information on the website and is hosted on the SHADD server, and the second is a file and documents database, which is managed by Regenerated Identities and hosted by Walk With Web Inc. This combination of two supporting servers allows performance optimization by sharing incoming traffic from users. Moreover, the databases together are backed up on Walk With Web Inc. dedicated servers, allowing long-term sustainability when SHADD hosting services are discontinued, after the completion of

the project. The meta-field schemes, in conformity with public visibility and database requirements, were created in-house by the developers in consultation with project director, researchers, and collaborators. We implemented user-sensitive inclusive design to develop this website, associated databases schemes, and editing platforms (Newell et al. 2011). This method promotes narrowing the gap between developers and historians, allowing us to truly embrace the meaning of “Digital Humanities” and let the historians drive the development, supported by computer programming experts at every step.

- 27 Secured file handling plugins installed across the website support the “Vassa’s Documents Database” in the “Studying Equiano” section of the website. The file management algorithm allows researchers to self-publish multiple images or document type files, in various sections of the website. The “Files on EW” scheme as displayed in FIG. 3 is managed and hosted by RegID which records uploads to the server by researchers and provides tags with the section name and entry ID. The front-end codes of *Equiano’s World* are connected to the RegID plugin for file management that assists with hosting higher resolution images and large sized document type files through *Cloudshare*, another service provided by WWW. Internet-based access to *Equiano’s World* is accessed through RegID via secure hypertext transfer protocol (HTTPS) protected by Secure Sockets Layer (SSL) certificates (Hirsch 2018). SSL Certificates are small data files that digitally bind a public cryptographic key of RegID’s digital authentication identity, which is tested for all interacting between a server and client computers. The network also provides access to MySQL database for researchers that is secured using an in-house developed security gateway implementing the latest and most sophisticated one-way password hashing algorithms. All programming files are versionized using Git, stored on Github repository, and versions are released for public access.⁹

FIGURE 3. Files on *Equiano’s World*

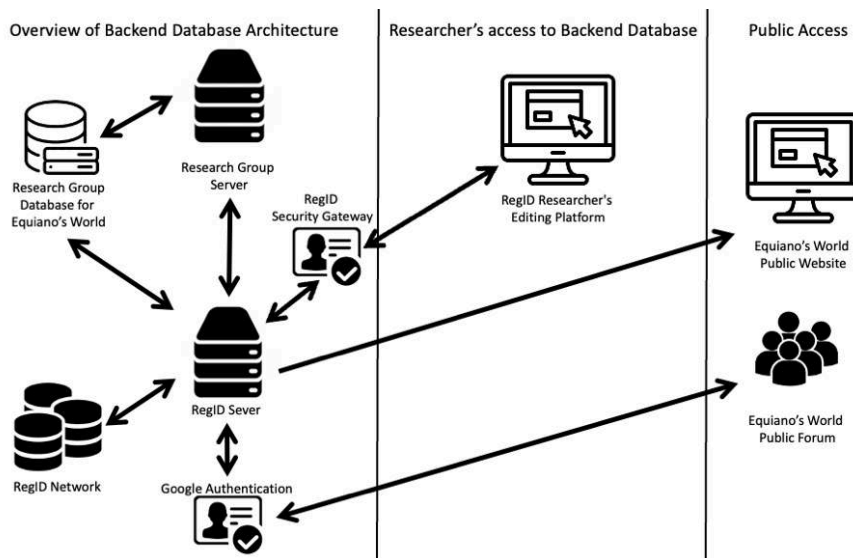


- 28 Git is a distributed version-control system for tracking changes in source code during software development. Access to any interface on RegID that allows public interaction with databases is protected by Google OAuth 2.0 authentication, which is the industry-standard protocol for authorization (Hardt 2012). OAuth 2.0 focuses on client developer

simplicity while providing specific authorization flows for web applications, desktop applications, mobile phones, and living room devices. While most information stored on the databases is open source, RegID brings in a well-woven secured technical structure to allow long-term functionality of the *Equiano's World* website and protects it from unwanted or unauthorized digital treasons on the server.

- 29 The digital architecture (FIG. 4) for *Equiano's World* is compatible with the RegID environment that connects with the SHADD hub and is supported by Walk With Web. The system design is strategically divided into multiple access levels with security layers for developers, researchers, and the public at large, to enable secure access to the backend MySQL database. The combination of shared and dedicated hosting for this project on the RegID network is managed by BlueHost services and Walk With Web Inc, respectively. The combination of these two types of hosting servers allows RegID to optimize incoming internet traffic, security gateways, and storage. RegID network is currently completely synchronized with SHADD shared server that is managed by GoDaddy web hosting services.

FIGURE 4. Digital Architecture of *Equiano's World*



- 30 The public forum is a stand-alone web application integrated into the *Equiano's World* website that is managed by Walk With Web Inc. The interface allows public users to submit topics for discussion, which are then published by the project director (or assigned researcher[s]) on the forum for open discussions. Responses from website users are recorded as publicly visible comments. User comments are non-editable and can only be deleted by the users themselves. The project director has discretion to request Walk With Web Inc. to remove a comment or topic of discussion from the website given circumstances that may require such action. As this section of the website requires the interaction of public users with our databases, Walk With Web, Inc uses Google OAuth 2.0 authentication to verify the commenter's legitimacy. The Google API scope is restricted to email and profile information, which includes first name, last name, and Google profile image. Only the first and last name of the commenter is stored on our database to publish a comment. However, we also allow users optionally to share their designation and affiliated institution.

31 *Equiano's World* is intended to address the extensive interest in the man who today is often referred to by his birth name, Olaudah Equiano. The website attempts to include the numerous sources on Gustavus Vassa and those with whom he associated so that students, scholars and the public can participate in historical research and engage in the debate and discussion that arises from exposure to a wealth of documentation. The fascination with the life stories of the millions of people who were caught up in the nexus of slavery is promoting extensive research, as is evident from a variety of websites, social media vignettes, and publications. As with *Freedom Narratives*, for example, biographical accounts are sufficiently numerous to offer the possibility of new levels of analytical approach to a history of slavery in the Atlantic world (Melek Delgado 2021; Lovejoy et al. forthcoming). Rather than considering enslaved Africans as numbers without voice or agency, what is being learned is that scattered data can be assembled to establish digital identities for a large population that can reveal patterns in migration that had previously been thought impossible to disentangle. The *Equiano's World* website is a digital tool that allows open access to documentary materials and scholarly analysis that enables knowledge mobilization through a format that overcomes disparities in educational resources and access.

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Liberated Africans (www.liberatedafricans.org), directed by Henry B. Lovejoy

Louisiana Slave Database (www.louisianaslavedatabase.org), directed by Gwendolyn Midlo Hall

Slave Images (www.slaveimages.org), directed by Henry B. Lovejoy

Slave Societies Digital Archive (www.slavesocieties.org), directed by Jane Landers

Walk With Web (www.walkwithweb.org), directed by Kartikay Chadha

NOTES

1. This paper can be related to the special issue “Embedding Slavery in Digital Humanities,” previously published in *Esclavages & post-esclavages/Slaveries & Post-Slaveries*: journals.openedition.org/slaveries/2192. We wish to thank Carly Downs, Érika Melek Delgado, and Henry B. Lovejoy for their comments on this paper and Fahad Qayyum for technical support. The research for the development of the website was funded by the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada, the Canada Research Chair in African Diaspora History and the Mellon Foundation. The project is part of a larger digital initiative to recover information on enslaved Africans and their descendants; see Walk With Web Inc., www.walkwithweb.org/. All weblinks are valid in February 2021.

2. Lovejoy 2012. Ironically, the several published biographies of Vassa consciously ignore the name with which he identified. Most notably, see Carretta 2005; Costanzo 1987; Edwards 1969; Lamore 2012; Walvin 1998, and almost all of the numerous articles about the man; see *Equiano's World*, “Resources”: www.equianosworld.org/resources-home.php.

3. First edition: London, 2 vols.: Printed for and sold by the author, No. 10, Union-Street, Middlesex Hospital; sold also by Mr. Johnson, St. Paul's Church-Yard; Mr. Murray, Fleet-Street; Messrs. Robson and Clark, Bond-Street; Mr. Davis, opposite Gray's Inn, Holborn; Messrs. Shepperson and Reynolds. and Mr. Jackson, Oxford-Street; Mr. Lackington, Chiswell-Street; Mr. Mathews, Strand; Mr. Murray, Prince's-Street, Soho; Mess. Taylor and Co. South Arch, Royal Exchange; Mr. Button, Newington-Causeway; Mr. Parsons, Paternoster-Row; and may be had of all the booksellers in town and country, 1789.

4. Second edition, London: Printed for and sold by the author, 1789, 2 vols.; Third edition, London: Printed for and sold by the author, 1790; New York edition, Printed and sold by W. Durell, New York, 1791; Fourth edition, Dublin: Printed for and sold by the author, 1791; Fifth edition, Edinburgh: Printed for and sold by the author, 1792; Sixth edition, London: Printed for and sold by the author & G.G.J. & J. Robinson, Paternoster-Row and by Charles Stalker, Stationers-Court, Ludgate-Street, 1793 enlarged; Seventh edition, London: Printed for and sold by the author, 1793; Eighth edition, Norwich: Printed for and sold by the author, 1794; and Ninth edition, London: Printed for and sold by the Author, 1794. Subsequent editions were published posthumously in 1809, 1813, 1814, 1815, 1819, 1837, and more recently in many editions since the 1960s. Translations have been published in Dutch (1790), German (1792), Russian (1794) and recently in Spanish, French, Italian, and Hebrew.

5. For a discussion of the size of the Black population in London, see Shyllon 1977; Walvin 1986; Braidwood 1994; Porter 1994.

6. Available at web.archive.org/web/20200218204140/http://equianosworld.tubmaninstitute.ca/.

7. April 16-18, 2019; lectures posted on equianosworld.org/video.php.
 8. "What is MySQL?," MySQL 8.0 Reference Manual. Available online: dev.mysql.com/doc/refman/8.0/en/what-is-mysql.html. The official way to pronounce "MySQL" is "My Ess Que Ell" (not "my sequel"), but we do not mind if you pronounce it as "my sequel" or in some other localized way.
 9. "GitHub: Where the world builds software". Available online: <https://github.com>.
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ABSTRACTS

Equiano's World (www.equianosworld.org) is a website that chronicles the life and times of Gustavus Vassa (c. 1741–1797), who is known most frequently by his birth name, Olaudah Equiano. Vassa became well known in Britain after the publication of his autobiography in 1789 and for his prominent role in the movement for abolition of the British slave trade, which was only finally enacted in 1807, ten years after his death. The associated database includes all known documentation on Vassa and information relevant to the study of his life. Foremost among these materials is his autobiography, *The Interesting Narrative of Olaudah Equiano, or Gustavus Vassa, the African*, which was republished nine times in his lifetime. Other documentation includes contemporary newspaper accounts, legal documents, and images from his life experiences. The website addresses issues arising from the context of Vassa's life, including his place of birth, his name, and his influence on the abolition movement. It demonstrates that he only wanted to be known by the name he was given when he was enslaved rather than by his birth name; even today he is best known as Olaudah Equiano or even simply Equiano, even though Equiano was not a surname. His unusual experience as an enslaved servant to a British naval officer during the Seven Years' War and afterwards to a merchant in the Caribbean gave him particular insight into the horrors of slavery and his commitment to its abolition. Because of the education he received on British ships and subsequently in London after he purchased his own freedom, he stands out as a prominent and literate intellectual and political activist. His autobiography continues to be read widely and taught in university courses. The project is part of a broader initiative that explores the testimonies and personal profiles of Africans who were enslaved during the era of slavery, most of whom were taken to the Americas.

The article outlines the structure of the website into seven sections: first, a Home page that includes a project history, acknowledgements, technical details, and a discussion of the "Best Practices" that underlie the project. The second section focuses on Context, examining key settings from the interior of the Bight of Biafra where Vassa was born, the slave trade of the late eighteenth century, the Middle Passage across the Atlantic, the Seven Years' War, and London and Britain in the late eighteenth century. The section on his travels has a chronological timeline and maps relating to them. The Associates section contains biographical sketches and images of his family, those whom he knew while he was enslaved, his associates in the Abolition movement, his co-religionists, and his connections in scientific and military circles. It also includes a list of individuals who subscribed to his autobiography. The section on Studying Equiano includes his autobiography, a list of its editions, and over 200 legal documents, letters, and newspaper notices and accounts. The Resources section includes a bibliography of several hundred items that discuss Vassa and his work, as well as audio and visual resources, links to websites on Vassa, slavery and diaspora. This article discusses technical details of website construction, which uses a

backend known as Regenerated Identities (RegID). The website relies on open-source content and has a search function that enables location of people, places, and periods relevant to Vassa's life.

Equiano's World (www.equianosworld.org) est un site web qui fait la chronique de la vie et de l'époque de Gustave Vassa (env. 1741-1797), plus connu sous son nom de naissance, Olaudah Equiano. Vassa est devenu connu en Grande-Bretagne après la publication de son autobiographie en 1789 et pour son rôle prépondérant dans le mouvement pour l'abolition de la traite des esclaves britanniques, finalement décrétée en 1807, dix ans après son décès. La base de données associée au site inclut toute la documentation connue sur Vassa et les informations pertinentes pour l'étude de sa vie. L'élément majeur parmi ces contenus est son autobiographie, *The Interesting Narrative of Olaudah Equiano or Gustavus Vassa, the African* (publiée sous le titre français *La véridique histoire par lui-même d'Olaudah Equiano, Africain, esclave aux Caraïbes, homme libre*) qui a été rééditée neuf fois de son vivant. Parmi les autres documents, on trouve notamment des articles de journaux, des documents officiels et des images de ses expériences de vie. Le site web aborde les questions soulevées par le contexte de la vie de Vassa, y compris son lieu de naissance, son nom et son influence sur le mouvement abolitionniste. Il démontre qu'il ne voulait être connu que sous son nom d'esclave, Gustave Vassa, plutôt que sous son nom de naissance ; encore à ce jour, il est mieux connu sous le nom d'Olaudah Equiano, ou même simplement Equiano, qui n'était même pas un nom de famille. Son expérience atypique d'esclave au service d'un officier de marine britannique pendant la guerre de Sept Ans et ensuite au service d'un marchand dans les Caraïbes lui a octroyé une connaissance approfondie des horreurs de l'esclavage et a été à l'origine de son engagement pour l'abolition. Grâce à l'éducation qu'il a reçue sur les navires britanniques, puis à Londres après avoir racheté sa propre liberté, il se démarque comme un éminent intellectuel instruit et militant. Son autobiographie est toujours amplement lue et enseignée dans les universités. Le projet fait partie d'une initiative plus large qui explore les témoignages et profils individuels d'Africains assujettis à l'ère de l'esclavage, dont la plupart ont été emmenés aux Amériques.

L'article expose les grandes lignes de la structure du site web en sept sections : d'abord, une *page d'accueil* qui comprend un historique du projet, des remerciements, des détails techniques et un débat sur les « bonnes pratiques » à la base du projet. La deuxième section s'attache au *contexte*, par l'examen d'éléments-clés de l'intérieur du golfe du Biafra où Vassa est né : la traite des esclaves de la fin du XVIII^e siècle, le Passage du Milieu transatlantique, la guerre de Sept Ans, et Londres et la Grande-Bretagne à la fin du XVIII^e siècle. Cette section sur ses voyages présente une chronologie et des cartes associées. La section sur les *associés* contient des croquis biographiques et des images des membres de sa famille, de ceux qu'il a connus pendant son esclavage, de ses associés du mouvement abolitionniste, de ses coreligionnaires et de ses connaissances dans les cercles scientifiques et militaires. Elle comprend également une liste de personnes qui ont soutenu financièrement son autobiographie. Cette section sur *l'étude d'Equiano* comprend son autobiographie, une liste des rééditions, et plus de deux cents documents officiels, lettres, avis et articles de journaux. La section *ressources* comprend une bibliographie de plusieurs centaines d'items autour de Vassa et de son œuvre, ainsi que des ressources audio et visuelles, des liens vers des sites concernant Vassa, l'esclavage et la diaspora. Cet article débat des détails techniques de la construction d'un site web qui utilise une interface appelée Regenerated Identities (RegID). Le site repose sur des contenus *open source* et présente une fonction de recherche qui permet de cibler des noms de personnes, de lieux et des périodes pertinentes de la vie de Vassa.

Equiano's World (www.equianosworld.org) es un sitio web que hace la crónica de la vida y de la época de Gustavus Vassa (1741-1797, aproximadamente), más conocido por su nombre de nacimiento, Olaudah Equiano. Vassa se hizo conocido en Gran Bretaña luego de la publicación de su autobiografía en 1789 y por su papel preponderante en el movimiento para la abolición de la trata de los esclavos británicos, decretada finalmente en 1807, diez años después de su muerte. La

base de datos del sitio incluye toda la documentación conocida sobre Vassa y las informaciones pertinentes para el estudio de su vida. El elemento mayor entre estos contenidos es su autobiografía, *The Interesting Narrative of Olaudah Equiano, or Gustavus Vassa, the African* (publicada en castellano con el título de *Narración de la vida de Olaudah Equiano, el africano, escrita por él mismo. Autobiografía de un esclavo liberto del siglo XVIII*), reeditada nueve veces en vida del autor. Entre los documentos se encuentran en particular artículos de diarios, documentos oficiales e imágenes de sus experiencias de vida. El sitio web aborda las cuestiones relacionadas con el contexto de la vida de Vassa, incluyendo su lugar de nacimiento, su nombre y su influencia en el movimiento abolicionista. Demuestra que quería ser conocido únicamente por su nombre de esclavo, Gustavus Vassa, y no por su nombre de nacimiento; hoy se lo conoce más por el nombre de Olaudah Equiano, o simplemente Equiano, que ni siquiera era un apellido. Su experiencia atípica de esclavo al servicio de un oficial naval británico durante la Guerra de los Siete Años y luego al servicio de un comerciante en el Caribe le otorgó un conocimiento profundo de los horrores de la esclavitud, lo que dio origen a su compromiso por la abolición. Gracias a la educación que recibió en las naves británicas, y más tarde en Londres, después de haber comprado su propia libertad, se destaca como un eminente intelectual, instruido y militante. Su autobiografía sigue siendo muy leída y estudiada en las universidades. El proyecto forma parte de una iniciativa más amplia que explora los testimonios y perfiles individuales de africanos sometidos en la época de la esclavitud, cuya amplia mayoría fue trasladada al continente americano.

El artículo expone las grandes líneas de la estructura del sitio web en siete secciones: en primer lugar, una página de *inicio* que comprende la historia del proyecto, agradecimientos, detalles técnicos, y un debate sobre las “buenas prácticas” que sustentan el proyecto. La segunda sección apunta al *contexto*, a través del examen de elementos clave del interior del golfo de Biafra, donde nació Vassa: la trata de esclavos de fines del siglo XVIII, el Pasaje del Medio transatlántico, la Guerra de los Siete Años, Londres y Gran Bretaña a fines del siglo XVIII. La sección sobre sus *viajes* presenta una cronología y mapas adjuntos. La sección sobre los *asociados* contiene croquis biográficos e imágenes de los miembros de su familia, de quienes conoció durante su esclavitud, de sus asociados en el movimiento abolicionista, de sus correligionarios y de sus conocidos en los círculos científicos y militares. Contiene también una lista de personas que ayudaron a financiar su autobiografía. La sección sobre el *estudio de Equiano* comprende su autobiografía, una lista de reediciones, y más de doscientos documentos oficiales, cartas, avisos y artículos en los diarios. La sección *recursos* comprende una bibliografía de cientos de ítems sobre Vassa y su obra, como también recursos de audio y visuales, vínculos a sitios sobre Vassa, la esclavitud y la diáspora. El artículo debate detalles técnicos de la construcción de un sitio web que utiliza una interfaz llamada Regenerated Identities (RegID). El sitio se basa en contenidos *open source* y presenta una función de búsqueda que permite dar con nombres de personas, lugares y períodos relacionados con la vida de Vassa.

Equiano's World (www.equianosworld.org) é um website que propõe a crónica da vida e do tempo de Gustave Vassa (c. 1741–1797), mais conhecido pelo seu nome de nascimento, Olaudah Equiano. Vassa tornou-se famoso na Grã-Bretanha depois da publicação de sua autobiografia em 1789 e pelo seu papel importante no movimento da abolição do trato de escravos britânico, decretada finalmente em 1807, dez anos depois de sua morte. A base de dados associada ao site inclui toda a documentação conhecida sobre Vassa e as informações pertinentes para o estudo de sua vida. O elemento principal entre estes conteúdos é sua autobiografia, *The Interesting Narrative of Olaudah Equiano or Gustavus Vassa, the African* (publicado em francês com o título *La véridique histoire par lui-même d'Olaudah Equiano, Africain, esclave aux Caraïbes, homme libre*) que foi reeditada nove vezes durante a sua vida. Entre os outros documentos, encontra-se nomeadamente artigos de jornais, documentos oficiais assim como imagens de suas experiências de vida. O site web aborda os problemas colocados pelo contexto da vida de Vassa, incluindo seu lugar de nascimento, seu

nome e sua influência sobre o movimento abolicionista. Mostra como ele queria ser conhecido pelo seu nome de escravo, Gustave Vassa, antes que pelo seu nome de nascimento; ainda hoje, é mais conhecido pelo nome de Olaudah Equiano, ou simplesmente Equiano, que nem era um sobrenome. Sua experiência atípica de escravo ao serviço de um oficial da marinha britânica durante a guerra de Sete Anos e depois ao serviço de um negociante nas Caraíbas tem-lhe dado um conhecimento aprofundado dos horrores da escravidão e originou o seu envolvimento na abolição.

A educação que recebeu nos navios britânicos, e a seguir em Londres, depois de ter comprado sua liberdade, permitiram que se tornasse um grande intelectual instruído e militante. Sua autobiografia continua sendo largamente lida e comentada nas universidades. O projeto faz parte de uma iniciativa mais ampla que explora as testemunhas e os perfis individuais de Africanos escravizados no tempo da escravidão, sendo a maioria levados para as Américas.

Este artigo apresenta a estrutura do website em sete secções: primeiro, uma Página de apresentação que inclui um histórico do projeto, agradecimentos, pormenores técnicos e uma discussão sobre as « boas práticas » na base do projeto. A segunda secção enfoca o Contexto, examinando elementos-chaves do interior do golfo do Biafra onde Vassa nasceu: o trato de escravos no final do século XVIII, o *Middle Passage* transatlântico, a guerra de Sete Anos, e Londres e a Grã-Bretanha no final do século XVIII. A secção sobre suas viagens apresenta uma cronologia e mapas referentes. A secção sobre os Associados contém esboços biográficos e imagens dos membros de sua família, das pessoas que conheceu durante a sua escravidão, de seus associados no movimento abolicionista, de seus correligionários, e das suas conexões com os círculos científicos e militares. Inclui também uma lista das pessoas que financiaram sua autobiografia. A secção sobre o Estudo de Equiano inclui sua autobiografia, uma lista das edições, e mais de duzentos documentos oficiais, cartas, avisos e artigos de jornais. A secção Recursos inclui uma bibliografia de várias centenas de itens referentes a Vassa e sua obra, assim como recursos audio e visuais, *links* para outros sites sobre Vassa, a escravidão e a diáspora. Este artigo discute os detalhes técnicos da construção de um website que usa uma interface chamada Regenerated Identities (RegID). O site baseia-se sobre conteúdos *open source* e apresenta uma função de pesquisa que permite focar nomes de pessoas, de lugares e de períodos pertinentes da vida de Vassa.

INDEX

Mots-clés: Olaudah Equiano, Gustave Vassa, esclavage, traite des esclaves, abolition, biographie, diaspora africaine

Keywords: Olaudah Equiano, Gustavus Vassa, slavery, slave trade, abolition, biography, African diaspora

Palabras claves: Olaudah Equiano, Gustavus Vassa, esclavitud, trata de esclavos, abolición, biografía, diáspora africana

Palavras-chave: Olaudah Equiano, Gustave Vassa, escravidão, trato de escravos, abolição, biografia, diáspora africana

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