

*Was Equiano an African or an African American?*

**Equiano, the African: Biography of a Self-Made Man**

by Vincent Carretta

(Athens, Georgia: University of Georgia Press, 436 pages, \$29.95)

*A University of Maryland professor contends that a famous autobiographical account of the Middle Passage may have been a hoax.*



Olaudah Equiano

Vincent Carretta, professor of English at the University of Maryland, has created a literary stir with the arrival of his new book *Equiano, The African: Biography of a Self-Made Man*. Professor Carretta is white.

In 1789 Olaudah Equiano wrote an autobiography entitled *The Interesting Narrative of the Life of Olaudah Equiano, or Gustavus Vassa, the African*. When the auto-

biography was published in 1789 it quickly became a favorite among white abolitionists on both sides of the Atlantic Ocean.

The book, which detailed the horrors of the Middle Passage, provided solid evidence of the evils of slavery and gave credence to the abolitionists' view that slavery was a profound human evil.

Equiano's book told the story of his birth in West Africa, his kidnapping, enslavement, and transportation to the New World aboard a slave ship. Equiano later bought his freedom and operated his own plantation in Central America where he too owned slaves. He then moved to England and published his memoir. The account served to add great fuel to the abolitionist movement, particularly in Britain. Moreover, it made Equiano a wealthy man.

But Professor Carretta's research persuades him that the memoir was, at least in part, a lie. Carretta discovered a British baptismal record and a 1773 ship's passenger list both of which state Equiano's birthplace as South Carolina.

Professor Carretta believes that Equiano embellished his tale from oral histories told to him by other slaves, possibly so he could sell more copies of his book and to strengthen his case for abolishing the slave trade.

But no matter where the black slave was born, Professor Carretta still holds Equiano's accomplishments in high regard.

*Book Note*

**When Affirmative Action Was White**

by Ira Katznelson

(New York: W.W. Norton, 238 pages, \$25.95)



Most of us think of affirmative action as a form of corrective justice in which law and private decisions are used to compensate members of a disadvantaged or oppressed group resulting from discrimination and unequal treatment in the past.

But in his new book, *When Affirmative Action Was White*, Ira Katznelson reveals another side to the coin. He shows that in the 1930s, 1940s, and 1950s, southern Democrats in Congress tailored federal legislation such as the G.I. Bill and the Social Security Act so that it would benefit working-class whites. The southern Democrats made certain that blacks would be excluded from the provisions of the legislation whenever possible. They also provided that where feasible the administration of benefits would be controlled at the local level. This meant that the programs would be run by white state and local government officials, most of whom were hostile to black interests. The southern Democrats in Congress also refused to permit antidiscrimination provisions in any legislation designed to give blacks an equal start at economic and educational opportunities.

Katznelson concludes, "At the very moment when a wide array of public policies was providing most white Americans with valuable tools to advance their social welfare — insure their old age, get good jobs, acquire economic security, build assets, and gain middle-class status — most black Americans were left behind or left out."

The author is correct. Decisions by whites to deny equal treatment to blacks must also be viewed as a form of affirmative action for whites.

This book is an admirable work of innovative research and thought. It is strongly recommended to all readers of this journal.