During the second half of the eighteenth century, black people living in England and anglophone America began publicly to contest the negative connotations that white Britons attributed to the term ‘African.’ At first glance the late eighteenth century may seem surprisingly late for this to have happened. By then Englishmen had been heavily engaged in the Atlantic slave trade for a century and they had been extracting plantation labor from black people for even longer. Several obvious factors help explain the delay: victims of the slave trade had to learn English and find ways to get their work into print before they could contest the racist assumptions that circulated in British print culture during the age of the slave trade.

A less obvious but more fundamental barrier blocked blacks from offering alternative definitions of ‘African’: until black people began to conceive of themselves as ‘African,’ they had little incentive to develop their own understandings of the word or the identity that it named. The shared oppression that victims of slavery experienced at white hands created conditions ripe for the emergence of racial identity, but people born in Africa during the era of the slave trade experienced countervailing forces that militated against racial identity. They had, after all, grown up with village-based, linguistic or political identities, and their traditional enemies had come from nearby. Most had been enslaved by those traditional enemies—‘Africans’ in European eyes—and thus had ample cause to hesitate before embracing a racial identity rooted in European notions of difference. Nonetheless, a sense of racial identity did emerge among the victims of Atlantic slavery. It grew in part out of struggles on the ground in American plantation societies. It emerged on a different level—that of print culture—when

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1 For a case study see my Ploughshares into Swords: Race, Rebellion, and Identity in Gabriel’s Virginia, 1730–1810 (Cambridge, Eng.: Cambridge University Press, 1997), esp. chs. 1–2.
the first generation of black authors writing in English laid claim to their ‘African-ness’ and reinvented its meaning during the final quarter of the eighteenth century.\(^2\)

The most important of these authors was Olaudah Equiano. In 1789 he published the first version of his autobiography, a book that would go through nine printings during his lifetime and one that has gained recognition since his death as a foundational text in African American letters. Equiano reported that he had been born in an Igbo village in present-day Nigeria, kidnapped as a child and sold into slavery to Europeans, and he wrote his life story after acquiring his freedom and settling in London.\(^3\) In his title—*The Interesting Narrative of the Life of Olaudah Equiano, or Gustavus Vassa, the African. Written by Himself.*—he announced a major theme of his book.\(^4\) He told the story of Olaudah Equiano, the Igbo boy, and of Gustavus Vassa, the African. The *Interesting Narrative* explained his journey from his ethnic past, a past he explicitly equated with the Old Testament, to his African Christian present. He offered that story as a prophetic call to others in the African diaspora to recognize the ‘true’ path to the Christian and racial identity that could promise them secular and sacred redemption. To reveal that promise he cast his explanation of the social and cultural diversity of Africa into sacred time. The *Interesting Narrative* tells the story of Equiano’s metaphorical passage from an Igbo Israeli

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