front those issues, from Washington to Paris, from Tokyo to Mexico City. This “Youthquake,” as Time called it, was an attack on the status quo that resulted in the rise of a “sixties generation” after 1968 that significantly altered American and West European societies. Perhaps “Youthquake” would be a more appropriate term, or as Suri uses in his book, “protesters.” I don’t know, but I do know that Suri has irritated some aging hippies. Sorry, you former communards from California’s Morningstar Ranch to Denmark’s Kana Commune. And I so foolishly thought that all of us, some 3 million mostly Western seekers, who were building communes or hitchhiking around America, Europe, and beyond—from Marrakech to Kathmandu—were on a personal search for meaning, for fulfillment, an attempt to escape the violent, destructive, and Puritanical behavior of the Establishment. Well, you former freaks, you’ll be surprised to know: you weren’t in the counterculture. Goodbye to all that. You no longer exist; you hippies have been tossed into the dustbin of History. Bummer.

Terry H. Anderson
Texas A&M University

Jeremi Suri does not wish to respond.

To the Editors:

James H. Sweet frames his article “Mistaken Identities? Olaudah Equiano, Domingos Álvares, and the Methodological Challenges of Studying the African Diaspora” (AHR, April 2009, 279–306) by caricaturing my position on the question of the identity of Olaudah Equiano raised by his baptismal and naval records. Sweet begins his distortion with the claim that “[a]ccording to Carretta, it was Equiano himself who provided that information”—i.e., the record that Equiano was born in “Carolina”—“to the Anglican priest” who baptized him (280). At first I thought that this statement was simply a misreading of my essay “Olaudah Equiano or Gustavus Vassa? New Light on an Eighteenth-Century Question of Identity” (Slavery and Abolition 20, no. 3 [1999]: 96–105) and other writings. But when Sweet later returns to the issue by saying, “[a]s Paul Lovejoy has pointed out, Equiano’s godmother may well have been the one responsible for claiming [Equiano’s] Carolina ancestry” (301), I realized that he was assessing my work through Lovejoy’s hostile lens rather than reading it himself. Had he done the latter, he would have discovered the sentence “Vassa himself of course may not have been responsible for the information or misinformation regarding the place and date of his birth recorded at his baptism” (102). Faithfully following Lovejoy, Sweet repeats Lovejoy’s confusion of Equiano’s godmother with his godmother’s sister, rather than checking my biography of Equiano to try to get his facts straight. Clearly Sweet knows his Lovejoy better than he does his Carretta.

Sweet’s characterization of my Equiano, the African: Biography of a Self-Made Man raises the question of how carefully he has actually read the book. He attributes to me a “desire to reconcile Equiano as either ‘African’ or ‘American [sic]’” (281), rendering my biography a simple-minded attempt to link Equiano to a single, stable identity. Sweet should have noticed my comments in the Preface that “[a]ttempts to pin Equiano down to either an American or a British identity are doomed to failure” (xiii), and that “the various overlapping identities the author displays in The Interesting Narrative should warn us not to try to limit him to one nationality” (xix). Sweet ought to have later found me saying that “the evidence that Gustavus Vassa invented the African birth of Olaudah Equiano is indecisive,” and addressing the issue of whether Equiano “was born an Igbo in Africa or raised as an Igbo in South Carolina” (320). Despite the ample evidence, none of which Sweet deals with, that I provide in my biography and elsewhere that Equiano had the means, motive, and opportunity to create a claim in the late 1780s to an African birthplace, Sweet imagines “that the burden of proof falls on Carretta to explain the situational contexts that might have inspired claims of a ‘Carolina’ birth” (301). Sweet, like Lovejoy before him, needs to offer a plausible explanation for why Equiano claimed an American birthplace when he had no apparent compelling reason to do so, other than the possibility that it may have been the truth.

Sweet continues to follow his leader in his discussion of the 1773 muster list, completely overlooking the evidence offered in my biography that others on the same voyage had no problem with identifying themselves as African-born. Somehow—Sweet does not reveal the methodology—he divines that Equiano was “fraught with self-reflexive anxiety” when asked for his birthplace (302). In publications that Sweet cites in footnote 4 but never engages, I have already addressed at some length what I see as the spurious evidence and spurious arguments Sweet largely repeats here. Although Sweet elsewhere in his article rightly calls for contextualizing evidence, he fails do so himself when he ignores the Royal Navy’s policy on slavery, the implications of the 1772 Somerset decision, the naval status of an “able seaman,” the distinction between a privately engaged servant and a slave, and the improbability that someone seeking to claim what Lovejoy and he call “British respectability” would choose a colonial rather than metropolitan birthplace to do so.

Of the six sentences Sweet devotes to the alleged linguistic evidence that Equiano was born in Africa, two simply assert that claim, while the others rush through the subject by inflating the very few instances of arguably Igbo language words in the narrative for Equiano to have invented them all” (302). Not surprisingly, Sweet does not mention that I devote much of one chapter in the biography to the complicated issue of Equiano’s claim to an Igbo identity.

Sweet’s last entry in his bill of particulars is his discovery of a logical conclusion. He correctly observes
that if Equiano had invented an African birthplace, he must also have invented the episodes in which he discusses his separation from his unnamed sister. I agree. Here Sweet should consider his own correct observation that “[i]n order to accommodate the Western genre of autobiographical narrativity, Equiano . . . had to adhere to particular literary patterns and plots for an English-speaking audience” (304), and take a look at my discussion of the sentimental literary trope of familial separation employed by Equiano.

Not only literary scholars believe that one should read documents carefully and describe them fairly before criticizing them. Should Sweet ever read my biography attentively, he will no doubt be pleased to discover that his call for a nuanced and contextualized treatment of Equiano’s complex combination of imbricated identities has been anticipated and answered.

VIN CARRETTA
University of Maryland

JAMES H. SWEET RESPONDS:

I would never imply that Vincent Carretta’s excellent biography can be reduced to a “simple-minded attempt to link Equiano to a single, stable identity.” On the contrary, Carretta’s book is a fine analysis of Equiano’s many overlapping, shifting identities. Nevertheless, the overarching thrust of his work is that Equiano was “self made,” implying a conscious, willful attempt to “invent” an African past in the name of a more authentic Atlantic creole identity. Carretta argues that this invented, African Equiano contradicts evidentiary elements from the earlier life of Gustavus Vassa, in particular the baptismal and ship’s muster records that claim a “Carolina” birth. He suggests in his response here, as elsewhere, that these documents are the “truth,” even as he leaves open the possibility that Equiano was born in Africa. Unfortunately, Carretta cannot have it both ways. While I agree that Equiano repeatedly remade himself, Carretta allows the baptismal and muster records to do his analytical work for him, reading “Carolina” backward through the lens of African “invention.” For me, none of the identities expressed in these documents can be read as “truth.” Rather, “Carolina” was one of many serialized, situational “inventions.”

In his response, Carretta falsely accuses me of distorting his position on Equiano’s birthplace. Citing his 1999 article, Carretta writes that “Vassa . . . may not have been responsible for the information . . . regarding the place and date of his birth recorded at his baptism.” Carretta fails to note that the quote is part of a longer sentence in which he implies that Vassa provided the information. What Carretta actually wrote was: “Vassa . . . may not have been responsible for the . . . place . . . of . . . birth recorded at his baptism, but that information was presumably available to the future Mrs. Baynes, who Vassa later said first knew him as an African.” Here, Vassa either conspired to lie about “Carolina,” along with the baptismal witness, Mrs. Baynes, or he later lied about her knowledge of him as an African. The implication is the latter, circling us back to Vassa’s ownership of “Carolina.” Either way, it is Carretta’s emphasis on the alleged duplicity that I reject. The Carolina birth may be “true” to the metanarrative of later African “invention,” however, Carretta does not fully consider the sociopolitical moment in which the claim was actually made, a moment heavily burdened by Equiano’s subjectivities. For me, Equiano’s “Carolina” was just as invented and situational as his later “Africa.”

Similarly, Carretta would like us to believe that “the evidence that Gustavus Vassa invented the African birth of Olaudah Equiano is indecisive.” First, it is important to recognize that Carretta distinguishes Vassa and Equiano as two different people—Vassa, the Atlantic author, “inventing” Equiano, the African. Second, Carretta again leaves off the crucial “but” that follows his sentence. In his book, the sentence reads: “The evidence that . . . Vassa invented the African birth of . . . Equiano is indecisive, but a compelling circumstantial case for self-invention can be made.” Carretta’s convenient neglect of so many qualifying “but”s is, by itself, revealing. More damning still, at the end of the second paragraph of his response, Carretta himself admits that “Equiano claimed an American birthplace.” Contradictions aside, most important for our purposes, Carretta never fully explores the “indecisiveness” of the documents; nor does he consider that that very indecisiveness might be an accurate reflection of African Atlantic experiences.

Regarding the 1773 muster list, I did not overlook the other African-born crewmembers on the Racehorse. I simply do not see their importance in Equiano’s self-presentation. Here, social context matters tremendously. Were any of the other Africans “personal servants” for white men? “Servants” for their former masters conducting scientific experiments? The keys here are not institutional markers like navy policy or British law, but rather, Equiano’s contradictory consciousness in this particular social setting. In order to emphasize his elevated status as “able seaman” and scientific assistant, Equiano had every reason to distance himself from perceptions of African servitude. As I also suggest, the “Carolina” identity could have been interpolated by a lazy scribe. These explanations differ significantly from Lovejoy’s “British respectability” thesis.

Finally, on the question of language, two observations: First, I use Carretta’s own work to argue that there were roughly ten Igbo words in Equiano’s Narrative. Carretta would like me to depend on his biography to elaborate on Igbo; however, my aim is not to repeat his arguments but rather to show that in those instances where Equiano invokes Igbo terms, he does so as a translator of an alternate epistemology. This is much more than mere word translation; it is the translation of someone deeply knowledgeable about a particular set of sociocultural ideas, far removed from Anglo sensibilities. Second, language is also crucial to my treatment of Equiano’s lost sister. While Carretta em-