

NORTH AMERICAN SLAVE NARRATIVES



An Introduction to the Slave Narrative

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Value of the Project

Narratives by fugitive slaves before the Civil War and by former slaves in the postbellum era are essential to the study of eighteenth- and nineteenth-century American history and literature, especially as they relate to the eleven states of the Old Confederacy, an area that included approximately one third of the population of the United States at the time when slave narratives were most widely read. As historical sources, slave narratives document slave life primarily in the American South from the invaluable perspective of first-hand experience. Increasingly in the 1840s and 1850s they reveal the struggles of people of color in the North, as fugitives from the South recorded the disparities between America's ideal of freedom and the reality of racism in the so-called "free states." After the Civil War, former slaves continued to record their experiences under slavery, partly to ensure that the newly-united nation did not forget what had threatened its existence, and partly to affirm the dedication of the ex-slave population to social and economic progress.

From a literary standpoint, the autobiographical narratives of former slaves comprise one of the most extensive and influential traditions in African American literature and culture. Until the Depression era slave narratives outnumbered novels written by African Americans. Some of the classic texts of American literature, including the two most influential nineteenth-century American novels, Harriet Beecher Stowe's *Uncle Tom's Cabin* (1852) and Mark Twain's *Huckleberry Finn* (1884), and such prize-winning contemporary novels as William Styron's *The Confessions of Nat Turner* (1967), and Toni Morrison's *Beloved* (1987), bear the direct influence of the slave narrative. Some of the most important revisionist scholarship in the historical study of American slavery in the last forty years has marshaled the slave narratives as key testimony. Slave narratives and their fictional descendants have played a major role in national debates about slavery, freedom, and American identity that have challenged the conscience and the historical consciousness of the United States ever since its founding.

In the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, slave narratives were an important means of opening a dialogue between blacks and whites about slavery and freedom. The most influential slave narratives of the antebellum era were designed to enlighten white readers about both the realities of slavery as an institution and the humanity of black people as individuals deserving of full human rights. Although often dismissed as mere antislavery propaganda, the widespread consumption of slave narratives in the nineteenth-century U.S. and Great Britain and their continuing prominence in literature and historical curricula in American universities today testify to the power of these texts, then and now, to provoke reflection and debate among their readers, particularly on questions of race, social justice, and the meaning of freedom.

Historical Context of Slavery

During the 350-year history of the transatlantic slave trade, Europeans made more than 54,000 voyages to and from Africa to send by force at least ten to twelve million Africans to the Americas. Scholars estimate that close to 400,000 Africans were sold into slavery in North America, the large majority ending up in the American South.

In the antebellum South, slavery provided the economic foundation that supported the dominant planter ruling class. Under slavery the structure of white supremacy was hierarchical and patriarchal, resting on male privilege and masculinist honor, entrenched economic power, and raw force. Black people necessarily developed their sense of identity, family relations, communal values, religion, and to an impressive extent their cultural autonomy by exploiting contradictions and opportunities within a complex fabric of paternalistic give-and-take. The working relationships and sometimes tacit expectations and

obligations between slave and slaveholder made possible a functional, and in some cases highly profitable, economic system. Despite the exploitativeness and oppression of this system, slaves emerge in numerous antebellum slave narratives as actively, sometimes aggressively, in search of freedom, whether in the context of everyday speech and action or through covert and overt means of resistance.

Defeat in the Civil War severely destabilized slavery-based social, political, and economic hierarchies, demanding in some cases that white southerners develop new ones. After the Civil War, the southern ruling class was compelled to adapt to new exigencies of race relations and a restructured, as well as reconstructing, economic system. For African Americans, the end of slavery brought hope for unprecedented control of their own lives and economic prospects. After Emancipation, however, most black southerners found themselves steadily drawn into an exploitative sharecropping system that effectively prohibited their becoming property owners with a chance to claim their share of the American Dream. Unlike many poor whites who also found themselves under the thumb of white landowners, the rural black masses in the post-Reconstruction South were gradually subjected to a cradle-to-grave segregation regime designed not simply to separate the races but to create a permanent laboring underclass different in degree but not fundamentally in kind from the slave population of the antebellum era. By the turn of the century segregation had robbed black Southerners of their political rights as well as their economic opportunity and social mobility.

Literary Contexts for Slave and Ex-Slave Narratives

As historical documents, slave narratives chronicle the evolution of white supremacy in the South from eighteenth-century slavery through early twentieth-century segregation and disfranchisement. As autobiography these narratives give voice to generations of black people who, despite being written off by white southern literature, still found a way to bequeath a literary legacy of enormous collective significance to the South and the United States. Expected to concentrate primarily on eye-witness accounts of slavery, many slave narrators become I-witnesses as well, revealing their struggles, sorrows, aspirations, and triumphs in compellingly personal story-telling. Usually the antebellum slave narrator portrays slavery as a condition of extreme physical, intellectual, emotional, and spiritual deprivation, a kind of hell on earth. Precipitating the narrator's decision to escape is some sort of personal crisis, such as the sale of a loved one or a dark night of the soul in which hope contends with despair for the spirit of the slave. Impelled by faith in God and a commitment to liberty and human dignity comparable (the slave narrative often stresses) to that of America's Founding Fathers, the slave undertakes an arduous quest for freedom that climaxes in his or her arrival in the North. In many antebellum narratives, the attainment of freedom is signaled not simply by reaching the free states, but by renaming oneself and dedicating one's future to antislavery activism.

Advertised in the abolitionist press and sold at antislavery meetings throughout the English-speaking world, a significant number of antebellum slave narratives went through multiple editions and sold in the tens of thousands. This popularity was not solely attributable to the publicity the narratives received from the antislavery movement. Readers could see that, as one reviewer put it in 1849, "the slave who endeavors to recover his freedom is associating with himself no small part of the romance of the time." Selling in the tens of thousands, the most popular antebellum narratives by writers such as Frederick Douglass, William Wells Brown, and Harriet Jacobs, stressed how African Americans survived in slavery, making a way out of no way, oftentimes subtly resisting exploitation, occasionally fighting back and escaping in search of better prospects elsewhere in the North, the Midwest, Canada, or Europe. Not surprisingly, in their own era and in ours, the most memorable of these narratives evoke the national myth of the American individual's quest for freedom and for a society based on "life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness."

Slave narrators such as Douglass, Brown, and Jacobs wrote with a keen sense of their regional identity as southern expatriates (the forerunners, quite literally, of more famous literary southerners in the twentieth century who left the South to write in the North). Knowing that the land of their birth had produced the likes of George Washington and Thomas Jefferson, southern-born slave narrators were often keen to contrast the lofty human rights ideology of Jefferson's "Declaration of Independence" with his real-world status as a slaveholder. While the autobiographies of the men of power and privilege in the nineteenth-century South are not read widely today, the slave narrative's focus on the conflict between alienated individuals and the oppressive social order of the Old South has spurred the re-evaluation of many hitherto submerged southern autobiographical and narrative forms, including the diaries of white women.

In most post-Emancipation slave narratives slavery is depicted as a kind of crucible in which the resilience, industry, and ingenuity of the slave was tested and ultimately validated. Thus the slave narrative argued the readiness of the freedman and freedwoman for full participation in the post-Civil War social and economic order. The biggest selling of the late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century slave narratives was Booker T. Washington's *Up from Slavery* (1901), a classic American success story. Because *Up from Slavery* extolled black progress and interracial cooperation since emancipation, it won a much greater hearing from southern whites than was accorded those former slaves whose autobiographies detailed the legacy of injustices burdening blacks in the postwar South. One reason to create a complete collection of post-Civil War ex-slave narratives is to give voice to the many former slaves who shared neither Washington's comparatively benign assessment of slavery and segregation nor his rosy view of the future of African Americans in the South. Another reason to extend the slave narrative collection well into the twentieth century is to give black women's slave narratives, the preponderance of which were published after 1865, full representation as contributions to the tradition.

Importance of This Project to the Nation

Slave and ex-slave narratives are important not only for what they tell us about African American history and literature, but also because they reveal to us the complexities of the dialogue between whites and blacks in this country in the last two centuries, particularly for African Americans. This dialogue is implicit in the very structure of the antebellum slave narrative, which generally centers on an African American's narrative but is prefaced by a white-authored text and often is appended by white authenticating documents, such as letters of reference attesting to the character and reliability of the slave narrator himself or herself. Some slave narratives elicited replies from whites that were published in subsequent editions of the narrative (the second, Dublin edition of Frederick Douglass's 1845 *Narrative* is a case in point). Other slave narratives, such

as *The Confessions of Nat Turner* (1831), gave rise to novels implicitly or explicitly intended to defend the myth of the South, such as John Pendleton Kennedy's *Swallow Barn* (1832), traditionally regarded as the first important plantation novel. Both intra-textually and extra-textually, therefore, the slave narrative from the early nineteenth century onward was a vehicle for dialogue over slavery and racial issues between whites and blacks in the North and the South. When reactionary white southern writers and regional boosters of the 1880s and 1890s decanted myths of slavery and the moonlight-and-magnolias plantation to a nostalgic white northern readership, the narratives of former slaves were one of the few resources that readers of the late nineteenth century could examine to get a reliable, first-hand portrayal of what slavery had actually been like.

Modern black autobiographies such as Richard Wright's *Black Boy* (1945) and *The Autobiography of Malcolm X* (1965) testify to the influence of the slave narrative on the first-person writing of post-World War II African Americans. Beginning with Margaret Walker's *Jubilee* (1966) and extending through such contemporary novels as Ernest J. Gaines's *The Autobiography of Miss Jane Pittman* (1971), Sherley Ann Williams's *Dessa Rose* (1986), Toni Morrison's *Beloved* (1987), and Charles Johnson's *Middle Passage* (1990), the "neo-slave narrative" has become one of the most widely read and discussed forms of African American literature. These autobiographical and fictional descendants of the slave narrative confirm the continuing importance and vitality of its legacy: to probe the origins of psychological as well as social oppression and to critique the meaning of freedom for black and white Americans alike from the founding of the United States to the present day.