The Slave Narrative

No experience of enslavement has been as fully recorded as that of African Americans in the United States in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Despite the large numbers of first-person accounts of slavery in the United States—hundreds from the early-nineteenth century (e.g. pamphlet-length documents and numerous book-length texts), significant numbers from the post-Civil War era, and thousands collected through the WPA during the Depression—these resources were commonly dismissed as merely abolitionist propaganda or skewed memories until the late-twentieth century. Over the past half century, however, the slave narrative in its various incarnations has helped reshape our understanding not just of slavery in the U. S. but of American culture and American literature more broadly. At the same time that these narratives are significant for the picture they paint of African-American life and culture (and American life and culture more broadly), they repeatedly emphasize the importance of the individual former slave and his or her struggles against a system that would deny his or her individuality as a human. For the purposes of this class, we will focus on what could be seen as the classic era of the slave narrative, the decades immediately preceding the Civil War when hundreds of such works were produced, including its most popular and most influential individual texts, all part of the larger anti-slavery movement intent on making Americans, especially white Northerners, recognize the true crime of slavery and the essential humanity of those enslaved.

The slave narrative can broadly be defined as any first-person account of the experience of being enslaved. Modern slave narratives, emerging from the transatlantic slave trade of Africans, first appeared in English in the late-eighteenth century with the development of a broad abolitionist movement in Britain. The first slave narratives tended to be short and often focused more on the writer’s conversion to Christianity and acceptance of God’s grace over the horrors experienced in slavery. The most prominent slave narrative of this period, Olaudah Equiano’s *The Life of Olaudah Equiano, or Gustavus Vassa, the African, Written by Himself* (1789), mirrors this tendency even as it begins to approximate the more focused abolitionism of later narratives. In his narrative, Equiano narrates being kidnapped from his home in Africa and taken to the new world, producing a picture of Africa as a kind of Edenic region being despoiled by European greed. Over the first half of his narrative, he focuses on his experience as a slave, as he serves during the Seven Years’ War on board a British privateer, expecting to earn his freedom only to be sold to a new owner in the Caribbean. He escapes the worst treatment in the Caribbean by becoming a valuable sailor for his owner, eventually accumulating enough money to buy his freedom. Unlike in many later slave narratives, however, Equiano’s acquisition of freedom does not become the culminating moment of his narrative, as the second half of the narrative continues, describing his adventures (including his participation in an attempt at exploring the North Pole) and his experiences of racism and dangers of being re-enslaved, foregrounding, in the end, his religious conversion and concluding with him making an economic argument for abolitionism. Equiano’s narrative reveals the formal instability of the slave narrative at the time, as it draws on several disparate literary traditions, most notably the Protestant conversion narrative, the related captivity
narrative, natural history and travel narratives, and picaresque adventure fictions such as Daniel De Foe’s *Robinson Crusoe*.

Over the course of the first decades of the nineteenth century, numerous former slaves produced published accounts of their lives, often through the help of a white amanuensis, but frequently on their own. As anti-slavery sentiment began to become both more wide-spread and more radical in the 1830s, black and white activists began to seek out more first-hand accounts of slavery’s cruelties. Accounts written by the former slaves themselves served an important second purpose, providing evidence of the intellectual capacity of African Americans and thus countering claims of their mental inferiority. These dual purposes came together most forcefully, famously, and influentially in Frederick Douglass’s *The Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, An American Slave, Written by Himself* (1845). Douglass had already established himself as a well-known abolitionist lecturer, and, in fact, he produced the narrative largely to counter claims that he had never been a slave. Much of the focus of the narrative, then, is on authenticating his life story, as he provides names and locales and, as often as possible, dates to corroborate his account. The work was immediately quite popular, with seven American and nine British editions appearing over the next five years, and more than 30,000 copies being sold. Douglass’s *Narrative* helped to consolidate the slave narrative as a form, bringing together some of the key thematic and structural elements of earlier narratives into a more unified form, and it thus often serves as representative of the form as a whole. Douglass’s *Narrative* begins with introductory letters from William Lloyd Garrison and Wendell Phillips, two of the most prominent white abolitionists of the time. The letters attest to Douglass’s truthfulness and to the fact that he wrote the narrative himself, at the same time providing readers with a template of the narrative’s chief points. While many slave narratives, especially those published by the authors themselves, did not have such introductory frames, they were common to many of the more widely disseminated, longer works. This prefatory material authorized the text that followed, thus empowering the former slave to tell his or her story, but the apparent necessity of such authorization reinforced the former slave’s dependence on white power structures and readership.

Like many slave narratives, Douglass’s begins with a simple statement of the fact that he was born, an announcement of his existence as a human being. This standard opening of many slave narratives—“I was born”—announces the existence of the slave as a human. But in what follows, he emphasizes all the ways that the system of slavery attempted to deny that humanity and treat him like an animal, by keeping him ignorant of his birthdate, by separating him from his mother and his family, by leaving him naked and assessing his worth alongside that of farm animals. Douglass thus reinforces Garrison’s overarching argument against slavery: slavery’s chief crime lies in the fact that it “reduces those who by creation were crowned with glory and honor to a level with four-footed beasts.” This point introduces the central rhetorical problematic of Douglass’s and most other slave narratives, the need to demonstrate how slavery destroys the humanity of the slaves (and of the slave-owners) while contending for the slaves’ fundamental humanity. Douglass, in other words, must at once show how the slaves have been dehumanized while simultaneously humanizing them in the eyes of his readers.
The production of the work itself by the former slave played a central role in this operation. Like many other slave narratives, Douglass’s title reinforced that it was “written by himself.” In a culture and society that prized literacy as one of the markers of intelligence and within an intellectual tradition that ranked non-literate, non-European cultures as fundamentally inferior, African-American literary production could provide strong evidence of black intelligence, thus rebutting pro-slavery arguments that Africans were intellectually incapable of freedom. That focus on literacy and on writing one’s self into existence becomes a central theme of Douglass’s and many other slave narratives. Douglass repeatedly recurs to the importance of literacy in his developing desire for freedom and in his actual escape from slavery. He recounts how Sophia Auld began to teach him the alphabet only to be warned by her husband that it was dangerous and worthless to do so, a warning that only spurred Douglass’s desire. He then tells us how he used poor white boys in his neighborhood in Baltimore to teach him and how he found an old copy of the *The Columbian Orator*, a common primer of the time, that he used as his textbook. In describing the impact of the *Orator* on him, Douglass states that it “gave tongue to interesting thoughts of my own soul which had frequently flashed through my mind, and died away for want of utterance.” As such, he seems to suggest that literacy helps to consolidate an innate desire for freedom that slavery and enforced ignorance darkens but cannot destroy.

Foregrounding the importance of literacy, Douglass characterizes the slaves who remain illiterate as living in a darkened world where they have only an inkling of the fundamental wrongs they suffer. He furthers this depiction of how slaves are kept enslaved—but not happy—through his account of his time with the slave-breaker Covey. In this episode, Douglass emphasizes how a combination of work, discipline, mental and emotional manipulation, and violence breaks down even the most resistant slave: “I was broken in body, soul, and spirit. My natural elasticity was crushed, my intellect languished, the disposition to read departed, the cheerful spark that lingered about my eye died; the dark night of slavery closed in upon me; and behold a man transformed into a brute!” Yet he also emphasizes his individual ability to rise above this dehumanization and to violently resist and re-establish his manhood and his humanity when he resists Covey and proclaims his refusal to be a “slave in fact” no matter how long he might remain a “slave in form.”

Despite all the deprivations of slavery, some innate human desire for freedom remains. It is in convincing his audience of that innate desire and of the importance of defending that desire that Douglass makes his strongest case to his audience.

As much as Douglass’s *Narrative* provided a template later writers would follow, it cannot stand in for the wide-range of experiences former slaves would narrate and their often very different emphases on the slave experience. In particular, part of the success of Douglass’s *Narrative* derived from its ability to reformulate the already standard American narrative of the self-made man. To an extent that many other slave narratives do not, Douglass emphasizes his own agency in overcoming the trials of slavery, his ability through sheer will and some luck to put himself in a position where he can escape to freedom. Such an emphasis is particularly lacking in slave narratives by women, in which the former slave’s relationship to her family, especially her children, tends to be emphasized. For example, in what is now the best-known slave narrative
by a woman, Harriet Jacobs’s *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* (1861), she foregrounds how familial connections both drive her desire for freedom and curtail her ability to achieve freedom. She also stresses her position as a woman, as the victim of sexual assault, directly addressing Northern white women to work on behalf of their black sisters who receive none of the protection they are supposedly guaranteed. In particular, she faces a different but parallel rhetorical position to Douglass. Like Douglass, she must make a case for her own humanity—and by extension the humanity of all slaves—while also emphasizing the dehumanizing nature of slavery. As Douglass describes how slavery emasculates male slaves, yet he is able to prove his own manhood, so Jacobs explains how slavery strips women of the kind of moral (sexual) protections that Victorian American society supposedly provided. For Jacobs, though, she feels compelled both to apologize for her sexual activity and to use it as evidence of slavery’s immorality. While the turning point in Douglass’s *Narrative* is his physical resistance to slavery in the form of Covey, Jacobs’s describes how she attempts to escape the advances of her master by having a child with another white man, asking white readers not to judge her by the same standards as other women even as she evidences her place as a true woman through her devotion to her children.

In addition to the different position they take in respect to their audience, Jacobs also differs from Douglass in her emphasis on family and community. Jacobs finally attempts to evade her master—and to convince him to sell her children to their father or one of her relatives—by hiding, for seven years, in the attic of the house of her grandmother, a freed black woman. During this period of hiding, she highlights the torture of being disconnected from her children and her reliance on the support of her family and the broader slave community. While Douglass describes his commitment and intense feelings for his fellow slaves in his first attempt at escape and elaborates the significance of slave songs early in his narrative, his more individual-focused text de-emphasizes the slave community and slave culture in a way others do not. Given the incredible importance of those connections to African-American survival in slavery, it is important to recognize Douglass’s relative lack of attention to those areas.

Douglass’s *Narrative* may have been the most influential and popular work of its sort, but many others also found wide audiences, including that by William Wells Brown, another influential African-American abolitionist who would go on to publish the first African-American novel, *Clotel* (1853). Other popular slave narratives often featured sensational tales and escapes, such as Henry “Box” Brown’s account of boxing himself up and shipping himself to the North; William and Ellen Craft’s *Running a Thousand Miles for Freedom* (1860), in which the married couple narrates how Ellen passed as a white man with William as her slave in their escape (Wells Brown included a fictional version of this tale in *Clotel*); and Solomon Northrup’s *Twelve Years a Slave* (1853), which describes how he, a free man in the North, was kidnapped in New York and taken South. Much of the popularity of these texts derived from increasing anti-slavery sentiment in the North, but recent scholars have begun exploring in more depth the ambivalent psychological, sometimes prurient interest readers may have taken in these texts. For example, slave narratives frequently pushed accepted boundaries in discussing sexual matters, straddling a line of accusing slavery of rendering the South a den of sexual iniquity while drawing readers in through hinting at sexual details largely
kept out of respectable literature of the time. Similarly, these narratives’ compelling stories of psychological and physical torture, emotional turmoil, and life-threatening escapes could potentially, for some readers at least, overwhelm their political thrust. Finally, many slave narratives made quite sentimental appeals to their readers, attempting to inculcate strong identifications with the slaves by accessing readers’ own familial connections, emotional ties, and moral sense of right and wrong. At the same time, though, such emotional connections could become the end themselves, offering a kind of vicarious pleasure of identification and rendering slaves nothing but pitiable victims and thus potentially lessening their political effect.

These possibly ambivalent effects of the slave narrative carry over to some of the works influenced by them during the antebellum period, most notably Harriet Beecher Stowe’s *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* (1851-52), and can be seen as one reason a number of African-American writers began exploring fictive literary forms in the 1850s. Stowe drew heavily on Josiah Henson’s slave narrative in crafting her incredibly popular, groundbreaking work. As we will see, however, Stowe’s interlacing of a form of racialism with her anti-slavery appeal and her overall characterization of the slaves as largely passive victims has, from its first appearance, been seen as problematic by black writers. For African-American authors writing in the wake of the Civil War, the slave narrative became a foundation to build on, a template of black life, and a model to escape from. For example, Booker T. Washington’s *Up from Slavery* (1901), the most famous post-bellum slave narrative, stresses how far Washington—and the African-American people—has come since the end of slavery, in many ways attempting to erase slavery as an influence on black life. Even as it does so, however, Washington’s text, as with many African-American fictional works of the era, continues the slave narrative’s emphasis on describing and explaining African-American life and culture from a sociological and political framework. For many African-American writers of the twentieth-century, this emphasis seemed somewhat limiting, and slave experience in itself tended to remain in the background in African-American literature until late in the century, when a number of writers began writing what has been called the neo-slave narrative—fictional accounts of slave narrative that grew out of the reformulation of the history of slavery that emerged alongside the Civil Rights Movement. Among the most important works that fall into this genre are Margaret Walker’s groundbreaking *Jubilee* (1966), award-winning works such as Toni Morrison’s *Beloved* (1987) and Edward P. Jones’s *The Known World* (2004), and revisionary, experimental works such as Octavia Butler’s time-travelling science-fiction novel *Kindred* (1979) and postmodern works such as Ismael Reed’s *Flight to Canada* (1976) and Charles Johnson’s *Middle Passage* (1990).