INTRODUCTION

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It wasn't until the very end of my education that I first read a slave narrative. Growing up in Rochester, New York, once an abolitionist stronghold, I knew about slavery and encountered evidence of it both in the classroom and the community. I vividly remember being taken as a small child to see a hidden room in a local restaurant which was a "stop" on the Underground Railroad. But I never read or was asked to read a slave narrative until the end of my coursework in graduate school.

My experience was not unique. In the not-so-distant past, few students read slave narratives in secondary school, in universities, or even in graduate school. For a variety of reasons, including political change caused by the Civil Rights movement, the steadfast work of many devoted scholars, and a radical shift in notions of what literature is and why we read it, the value of the slave narrative has multiplied exponentially. Today, students at every level are likely to encounter these narratives of slavery, escape, and freedom written by fugitives of British colonial and American slavery in a wide range of courses.

Indeed, the existence of this volume is a testament to that sea change. Volumes in the Cambridge Companion series offer what Cambridge University Press describes as "lively, accessible introductions to major writers, artists, philosophers, topics and periods." The publication of this Companion confirms that the African American slave narrative is now recognized as a "major" genre, firmly established in the academic canon of what should be read and studied.

This Cambridge Companion, then, covers a rare phenomenon: a "major" genre that, because of its unusual history, may still be relatively unknown to some readers. For this reason, my goal in editing this volume has been to answer even the most basic questions about the genre: What is a slave narrative? When, why, and by whom were these narratives written? Who read them? At the same time, I have chosen essays which introduce readers

to the now broad range of scholarship in several of the different contexts in which the slave narrative is now studied.

The first part, "The slave narrative and transnational abolitionism," examines what may be the most obvious context for the slave narrative: abolition. First and foremost, the slave narrative is a text with a purpose: the end of slavery. The slave narrative is a key artifact in the global campaign to end first the slave trade (the practice of transporting slaves across international waters), then colonial slavery (in British Caribbean colonies like Jamaica), and finally US slavery. In the first essay of the volume, "The rise, development, and circulation of the slave narrative," Philip Gould sketches for us the ideologies of the religious and political groups that shaped the language and themes of the narratives. At the same time, he cautions that "slave narratives cannot be reduced to these different ideological influences" and unpacks for the reader the ways in which the narratives "creatively engage the expectations of these groups in order to create cultural spaces in which the project of self-representation takes place." Gould also explores how the material and economic realities surrounding the slave narratives' publication shaped their content and format. This opening essay sets the parameters for the volume as a whole with its careful discussion of a wide range of slave narratives and its focus on the narrative's presence and importance both in England and the USA from the early 1770s until the American Civil War and, in other essays in the volume, beyond.

In chapter two, "Politics and political philosophy in the slave narrative," Dickson D. Bruce, Jr. focuses on one of the subjects identified by Gould – the political philosophy of the slave narrative – while maintaining a similar broad focus and referencing a range of narratives. Bruce explores how, in order to counter proslavery ideas, slave narratives engage with the conventional ideas, images, and rhetorical conventions about slavery and freedom that were familiar to the reading public. By embracing distinctly American ideals and values – of Christian faith, of the centrality of the family, and of a notion of freedom that encompasses individualism and independence – that were rooted in and central to the newly emerging Republic, the narratives, according to Bruce, are able to argue effectively for the abolition of slavery.

One early text, and indeed one figure, Olaudah Equiano, is pivotal to the interplay between the slave narrative and abolition, and thus deserves his own essay. Vincent Carretta's "Olaudah Equiano: African British abolitionist and founder of the African American slave narrative" explores Equiano's "rise from the legal status of being an object to be sold by others to become an international celebrity, the story of whose life became his own most valuable possession." While describing the success of this "founder" of the slave narrative in redefining the image of the slave, Carretta explores the latest

research, including his own, on how Equiano invented and constructed his story, based only partially on the facts of his life. For Carretta, Equiano's achievement lies not merely in this artful construction of his narrative, however, but also in his mastery of the publication process which ensured his own financial success and allowed him to resist many of the constraints other former slaves faced telling their stories in the white-controlled literary marketplace.

If Equiano was able to master the fraught dynamics of the abolitionist marketplace, others struggled to negotiate this genre that was often defined by the needs and values of white abolitionists. Kerry Sinanan, in the fourth and final chapter of this first part of the volume, examines several case studies that exhibit the "signs of exchange, argument, and debate" between slaves and white abolitionists as these two groups worked together in the fight against slavery. "The slave narrative and the literature of abolition" moves from Equiano's skillful incorporation of a range of texts and sources as an exploitation of "the rhetorical and mythical power of the west's own literature" to several different attempts by Frederick Douglass to resist the dominant abolitionist discourse and assert an independent identity for himself. In her discussion, Sinanan reminds readers that the slave narrative is not simply a hybrid form drawing on preexisting literature to create a form of autonomous self-expression for the ex-slave. Abolitionist literature also modeled itself on and even copied slave narratives, and Sinanan explores this complex interdependence in the work of several black and white writers, including Harriet Beecher Stowe, the author of *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, and the slave narrator Josiah Henson.

The second part of the volume, "The slave narrative and Anglo-American literary traditions," examines the ways that these narratives, which were written to change the world, also function as literary texts and engage the generic expectations of readers of other important literary forms of the same time. This part points to the vast area of current research aimed at exploring the interchange between the slave narrative and other literary traditions.

In chapter five, the first essay in this part, "Redeeming bondage: the captivity narrative and the spiritual autobiography in the African American slave narrative tradition," Yolanda Pierce examines the narratives of Venture Smith and George White, and focuses on how each employed the conventional genres of the captivity narrative and the spiritual autobiography to tell their "unconventional" stories of slavery and freedom. The captivity narrative, a distinctly American popular literary genre, tells the story of abduction, trial, and escape faced by "innocent" colonists who resist the savagery of their Native American captors and generally glorify the Christian way of life. The spiritual autobiography was a more widespread and

longstanding literary tradition, "loosely modeled after the biblical account of Paul's conversion," in which a convert to Christianity documents the personal trials of his life and his spiritual conversion to "the true light of Christian doctrine." Both of these genres, with their emphasis on spiritual enlightenment, provided a recognizable and culturally acceptable template for the slave narrator, and Pierce explores how Smith and White, like other narrators, not only employ but also transform these genres to "restore honor and worth to the status of 'African' in early American culture."

In chapter six, "The slave narrative and the revolutionary tradition of American autobiography," Robert S. Levine turns to a more secular tradition, that of the autobiography. Some critics have concluded that the slave narrative does not attain the stature of autobiography because of the many constraints slave narrators faced in crafting and producing their stories. But the "'classic' white-authored autobiography" is as structured and delimited by generic conventions, argues Levine, as is the slave narrative. In this chapter, Levine demonstrates that many slave narrators found Benjamin Franklin's *Autobiography* an enabling, if also challenging, model, which they did not "blindly or un-self-consciously follow." As Levine explores a wide range of narratives, he finds that the American revolutionary tradition affords the slave narrators a powerful connection between "the individual uplift of the black persona" and "the revolutionary cause of freedom."

While Pierce and Levine consider the slave narrative in relation to earlier and contemporaneous literary traditions, focusing on how slave narrators exploited and transformed these forms for their own purposes, Cindy Weinstein asks us to think about the contribution slave narratives made to an Anglo-American antebellum literary tradition, the sentimental novel. In chapter seven, "The slave narrative and sentimental literature," Weinstein argues that sentimental literature and the slave narrative intersect with, challenge, and should be read in dialectical relation to each other. In her discussion, Weinstein reads several white-authored sentimental novels, including *Ida May* and *Marcus Warland*, and suggests that how a "sentimental heroine becomes free, how she experiences her bondage, and how her experience is told" was frequently informed by generic conventions of the slave narrative, which functioned for readers as "a lens through which to view the sentimental experience."

The third part of the volume, "The slave narrative and the African American literary tradition," examines a longstanding context for the slave narrative: African American literature. While the academic world has only "discovered" the slave narrative in recent years as an important and interesting genre, the slave narrative has always served as an essential, if sometimes vexing, model for African American writers.

Robert F. Reid-Pharr opens this part with chapter eight, "The slave narrative and early Black American literature," where he asks us to rethink "linear and singular conceptions of the development of Black American culture." In particular, Reid-Pharr wants to challenge the notion that the slave narrative articulated "simple truths" and that the literature that followed these narratives was "more muddled and less sophisticated." Reid-Pharr reads *Clotel*, *The Garies and Their Friends*, and *Our Nig* as works that do not transcend but rather are influenced by the same complex political and material forces that shaped the slave narrative. For Reid-Pharr, it is this "messy, parodic, over-determined, promiscuous, multiform and naive tradition" that is "the best part of the fantastic legacy" of the slave narrative.

In chapter nine, Deborah E. McDowell takes as her subject an historical span ranging from post-Reconstruction to the Harlem Renaissance, and, like Reid-Pharr, she asks how African American writers "grappled with the generic conventions of the slave narrative." She finds that, amid racial uplift and a "zeitgeist of progressivism" – the optimistic spirit of the age – African American writers could not "exorcise" the legacies of slavery and the slave narrative. Indeed, in a chapter that considers the work of Frances Harper, Booker T. Washington, Charles W. Chesnutt, W. E. B. Du Bois, James Weldon Johnson, and Zora Neale Hurston, McDowell notices "the frequency with which shame appears" as these writers struggle to "will away" slavery.

In contrast to the literary era that McDowell considers, the late twentieth century has witnessed a need to grapple with slavery and the slave narrative that has proved both enduring and energizing for African American writers. So much writing has emerged about slavery that a term, the "neo-slave narrative," was coined in 1987 by Bernard W. Bell in his *The Afro-American Novel and Its Traditions*. In chapter ten, "Neo-slave narratives," Valerie Smith sets out to capture the "range and complexity of this genre of writing." She discusses Toni Morrison's *Beloved* at length, along with Edward P. Jones's recent and acclaimed *The Known World*, as well as a wide variety of other texts that will intrigue students of the slave narrative.

The final part of the volume, "The slave narrative and the politics of knowledge," examines the critical history of the slave narrative and reflects on the overall direction of the field. Why were these texts once ignored? And what are we ignoring in our current study of the genre? Which texts aren't being read? What questions aren't being asked?

Stephanie A. Smith begins the discussion in chapter eleven, "Harriet Jacobs: a case history of authentication." In a review of the critical history of Jacobs's *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*, Smith reflects on its new position in the literary canon, made possible by the work of Jean Fagan Yellin within the context of larger changes in the field, including the emergence of

feminist criticism. As Smith shows, the treatment of *Incidents* constitutes both a unique story related to the particularities of Jacobs's text and a representative instance of the general devaluation of the work of African American and women writers in the first half of the twentieth century. Racism, sexism, and a modern literary aesthetic that eschewed sentimentalism combined to ensure that this narrative would not be visible, and Smith asks us to read this case history "as a cautionary tale about aesthetic value and literary politics."

Frederick Douglass, a writer and intellectual who was much lauded as a "representative American man," forms a sharp contrast to Harriet Jacobs, whose narrative was for so long denied both validity and representational value. John Stauffer, however, in chapter twelve, allows us to reflect on the ways Douglass was engaged, like Jacobs, in a difficult enterprise of self-creation. In "Frederick Douglass's self-fashioning and the making of a representative American man," Stauffer explores Douglass's speeches, his 1845 *Narrative*, and his 1855 *My Bondage and My Freedom* in order to consider the ways in which Douglass, over time, fashioned and re-fashioned himself as a representative American man, and not a slave or a thing.

Chapter thirteen, "Beyond Douglass and Jacobs," considers the fact that Douglass, long a "representative man," and Jacobs, the newly representative woman, stand at the center of what has become this "major" genre: the African American slave narrative. John Ernest asks readers to think not just about why certain narratives are now deemed representative and therefore taught with regularity, often to the exclusion of others, but also about what it means to try to understand slavery through a handful of narratives written by former slaves. Ernest worries about whether the slave narrative's acceptance as part of the "settled knowledge represented by the [literary] canon" will produce a "dangerously simplified view of the past," particularly when students of the genre begin to read only the same few texts and ask of them the same few questions. Ernest's chapter raises a fundamental challenge for the study of the slave narrative to which this volume has tried to respond.

The final chapter in the volume reminds us that issues of representativeness and the concomitant problems of exclusion were always present for women trying to utilize the vehicle of the slave narrative and enter into public debate. Moreover, Xiomara Santamarina's discussion of a range of women's texts in chapter eleven, "Black womanhood in North American women's slave narratives," reminds us that Harriet Jacobs's recuperated text is not the only female-authored slave narrative that has proved problematic in literary history. Her discussion of Mary Prince, Sojourner Truth, Ellen Craft, Louisa Picquet, and Elizabeth Keckley offers us "a rich archive about race and gender" and the "multidimensionality of black women's lives" and might

be read as a fruitful response to John Ernest's challenge to think "beyond Douglass and Jacobs." I hope the same may be said for this volume as a whole.

In 1987, when Henry Louis Gates, Jr. edited *The Classic Slave Narratives*, a volume containing the narratives of Olaudah Equiano, Mary Prince, Frederick Douglass, and Harriet Jacobs, he brought these narratives together in a convenient and inexpensive format that could be used both in classrooms and outside of them. Today, the narratives of Equiano, Douglass, and Jacobs are widely available in myriad editions, but so too are many others. Indeed, as part of "Documenting the American South," a major digital publishing initiative, sponsored by the University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill, William L. Andrews has compiled a comprehensive bibliography of slave narratives with links to full-text electronic versions for most citations.[1] With the wealth of electronic and critical editions of the narratives available today, students of the slave narrative have little excuse for reading only, as John Ernest writes, "one complete narrative and about one-seventh of another."

If the availability of primary material has exploded, so too has the critical literature around the slave narrative. My hope is that this volume will follow in the estimable tradition of John Sekora and Darwin T. Turner's *The Art of Slave Narratives* (1982) and Deborah E. McDowell and Arnold Rampersad's *Slavery and the Literary Imagination* (1989) in capturing something of the rich variety of this dynamic and evolving field while still allowing those for whom the genre is new to keep up with the conversation.

NOTE

1. See http://docsouth.unc.edu/neh/index.html

PART I

The Slave Narrative and Transnational Abolitionism

1

PHILIP GOULD

The rise, development, and circulation of the slave narrative

In the late eighteenth century, important cultural and philosophical changes facilitated the rise of antislavery movements. These developments are rich, complex, and usually fall under the rubric of "Enlightenment" ideology. The historian David Brion Davis has identified three of them. One was the rise of secular social philosophy, based on humanitarian principles and contractual terms for human association and government, found in such thinkers as Baron Montesquieu and John Locke, which drastically narrowed the traditional Christian rationale for slavery as the natural extension of the "slavery" of human sin.[1] Another important development was the rise of sentimentalism in the eighteenth century, which, related to evangelical religion, popular fiction, and urban cultures of refinement, raised the importance of the virtues of sympathy and benevolence as well as the cultural refinement accompanying them. A third development, especially important in the 1790s, was the proliferation of more radical and revolutionary ideas about natural rights vis-à-vis state and social forms of authority.

The slave narrative first emerged during the 1770s and 1780s in the context of these transatlantic political and religious movements which shaped the genre's publication history, as well as its major themes and narrative designs. These late eighteenth-century works reveal what Paul Gilroy calls the "transcultural international formation" of the "Black Atlantic" – that fluid geographical area encompassing the West African littoral, Britain, British America, eastern Canada, and the Caribbean – through which black subjects traveled as free persons and as slaves.[2] The conditions and contexts for publishing these early narratives were in many ways unique. Evangelical Christian groups often sponsored and oversaw their publication. By the 1780s, new political organizations, like the English Society for Effecting the Abolition of the Slave Trade (1787) and the Pennsylvania Abolition Society (1775/1784), dedicated to the abolition of the slave trade, also played a role in encouraging and publishing these narratives.

These religious and political groups helped to shape the language and themes of the eighteenth-century slave narrative: they helped to influence the genre's treatment of the black protagonist's physical and spiritual journey. Not until the organization of more radical antislavery societies in America during the 1830s and 1840s, which now called for the immediate emancipation of slaves, did the genre turn its energies upon Southern plantation slavery. Such an important change did not entirely nationalize or secularize the slave narrative, but it did produce new literary conventions, rework traditional ones, and effectively standardize all of them to the point where the slave narrative was an easily imitated – and sometimes forged – literary form. While earlier narratives were published, read, reviewed, and reprinted as much for their religious as racial experiences, the antebellum slave narrative sharpened its focus and became an increasingly popular and effective political means of fighting slavery.

Slave narratives cannot be reduced to these different ideological influences, but they do creatively engage the expectations of these groups in order to create cultural spaces in which the project of self-representation takes place. Whether actually writing or only orally relating their lives, slave narrators drew on multiple discourses as a way of cultivating such complex identities that lay ambiguously within and without contemporary norms.

Context, genre, theme

The first black autobiographers largely wrote within the norms of "civilized" or "Christian" identity – one that was more often than not associated directly with "Englishness." The *Narrative of the Uncommon Sufferings and Surprising Deliverance of Briton Hammon, a Negro Man* (1760) appropriates such a civilized persona. The narrative, which recounts Hammon's thirteen-year odyssey of shipwreck and captivity in the Caribbean, contrasts his self-image as a "free" English subject with his presumably barbaric captors, Native Americans or the Spanish in Havana. The *Narrative* concludes with Hammon's fortuitous rediscovery of his "good Master" Winslow on board a ship bound from England to New England, and his symbolic reunification with him. Hammon leaves the terms of his "service" to Winslow deliberately ambiguous as a way of being able to access the language of English liberty, which was especially resonant for British and British American readers during the Seven Years War (1754–63), and to thereby legitimize himself by exploiting the period's anti-Catholic fervor and assuaging anxieties about slave unrest in Massachusetts.[3] By manipulating this ideal of the rights of Englishmen, moreover, Hammon suggests the kind of thinking that, a decade later, would underlie the famous decision by Lord Mansfield