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Introduction

Slavery is of course an indisputably central topic in American history. Yet to date, students, teachers, and scholars have had no collection of essays aimed at an overview of its place in American literature to draw upon. The seeds of this book were sown a few years ago when I set out to design a survey course on race and slavery in American writing. To broaden my preparation beyond the eighteenth- and early-nineteenth century focus of my previous research on the subject, I returned to a long-admired group of essays: Deborah McDowell and Arnold Rampersad's *Slavery and the Literary Imagination* (1989), a brilliant and enduring collection, but a set of English Institute papers that made no attempt at comprehensive treatment.[1] At that moment, I became convinced of the need for a compact resource of the kind that a *Cambridge Companion* can best supply. Since the 1980s, there has been no topic more centrally important to students and teachers of American literature internationally than the cultural impact of slavery, a subject with global reach in spite of its regional foci. While there are numerous collections that cover the treatment of slavery in pre–Civil War American literature (including a recent *Cambridge Companion* on the slave narrative), the *Cambridge Companion to Slavery in American Literature* casts a wider net.[2] Taken together, the chapters that follow extend the usual boundaries of the topic in several ways: first, by ranging beyond autobiographical genres and their direct fictionalization to take in a more comprehensive range of literary and cultural forms including poetry, drama and performance, film, and even music; second, by covering a nearly three-century span from the early eighteenth century to the early twenty-first, while still maintaining and supporting a largely pre–Civil War center of historical gravity; and third, by thinking about the literature of slavery in a larger geographical context, centered on the United States, but also occasionally reaching out beyond its borders. Yet the guiding principle of this collection is, first and foremost, to keep the emphasis on slavery as a *literary* topic over this long period.

Over the nearly four centuries between the arrival of the first slaves in North America in 1619 and the time of this writing in 2015, American culture has confronted the history of slavery and its complex legacies, in part, by turning it into language, image, music, and a range of other aesthetic forms. *The Cambridge Companion to Slavery in American Literature*, then, is not a history of a cultural "argument"; not a history of a moral dilemma nor of an "idea"; still less is it an analysis of an institution or of the lived experience of its subjects and sufferers. All of the above can indeed be approached in part through a consideration of literary texts and enriched by that dimension of analysis. But the present volume aims at something quite different, namely, an analysis of the centuries-long interaction between "slavery" and aesthetic form. The quotation marks around the former are meant to mark the process by which slavery underwent a transfer or translation from an actual institution into a theme of writing – that is, the process by which slavery became subject matter. Once we describe it in these terms, the question that presents itself is that of the precise nature of this relationship between slavery as thematic content and the forms in which it found expression. There are two complementary sides to this story. On the one hand, slavery gave rise to unique genres such as the slave narrative and the spiritual, minstrelsy and the plantation novel. Some of the chapters of this collection thus track how the exigencies of "speaking slavery" generated new genres of cultural expression suited to its distinct political, philosophical, moral, and affective challenges. On the other hand, we can follow the entrance of slavery into preexisting literary and cultural forms – sentimental fiction, lyric poetry, drama, cinema – in order to gauge how such forms found themselves re-formed or even deformed as they attempted to incorporate slavery's intractable "content." This, then, is a different way to register the impact of slavery as a literary theme: to observe how it reshaped the already-established genres that strove to contain it.

For a concrete example of this twinned consideration of the relationship between slavery and literary form, we might look at two antebellum narratives many would regard as classic cases of the problem: the *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, an American Slave* (1845), and Harriet Jacobs's *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* (1861).[3] For reasons I shall detail in a moment, these texts seem to bespeak a particularly acute awareness of their relation to past and present literary production. But we can say more generally that a certain fundamental condition of intertextuality issues from the strange dual purpose of the slave narrative itself. On the one hand, such narratives represented the condition of slavery as a singular experience born of monstrous acts with no parallel in ordinary human experience. On the other hand, in order to engage the sympathies and move the minds of a

readership who could have no experiential reference point for such a condition, they had to frame it in familiar terms that would render it both intelligible and comprehensible. In short, they had to represent slavery as incomparable while subjecting it to comparison. The most basic way in which they did so was to draw on the "liberty plot" that Laura Doyle has located at the center of English-language prose writing since the onset of modernity, when the political discourse of the English Revolution, the emergence of transatlantic mercantile networks, and the rise of Saxonist racial ideology first came together in a story of "race-liberty" that was ubiquitous in all manner of narrative from the early seventeenth century until well into the twentieth.[4] When Anglophone writers of African descent entered into the literary public sphere in the late eighteenth century, then, they appropriated this older "drama of a struggle against tyranny,"[5] and reconfigured its racial logic to narrativize the slave's struggle against the tyrannical power of the Anglo-Saxon.

In general terms, then, to "write slavery" meant to use literary precedents to formulate unprecedented experience. Harriet Jacobs's narrative was virtually defined by this problem and the representational strategies to which it gave rise. In her hands, the slave's narrative appeared to be a genre necessarily cordoned off from the wider literary culture and yet, at the same time, a recombination of various aspects of that culture. In order to frame the story of her life under slavery, Jacobs drew not only the deep structure of the freedom plot, but also on a variety of specific contemporary literary forms including the colonial captivity narrative (arguably always in the background of the slave narrative), the gothic romance (Jacobs figures her master as a "tyrant",[6] her hiding place as a "dungeon,"[7] and slavery as like "the Inquisition"[8]), and the sentimental-domestic novel (she knows that her readership expects her story to end "in the usual way, with marriage").[9] In fact, it was this indebtedness to antebellum literary culture that long rendered Jacobs's narrative suspect in the eyes of some modern commentators, as Hazel Carby observed in a groundbreaking and influential critical discussion.[10] Arguing against historian John Blassingame, who had branded *Incidents* as inauthentic on the grounds that it was "too melodramatic," too orderly, and too reliant on literary conventions to be historically illuminating,[11] Carby showed us that precisely the opposite was the case: the narrative was at its *most* historically illuminating precisely when it was in closest dialogue with the conventions of antebellum literary culture. For, read properly, the narrative is a case study in "how an ideology that excluded black women from the category 'women' affected the ways in which they wrote and addressed an audience."[12] Carby's primary critical goal was to expose the implicit masculinism of the idea that any use of sentimental codes

of femininity to frame the slave's story was evidence of a distortion of experience by "literary stereotype,"[13] and also to dismantle the unspoken suggestion that only the experience of a male slave such as Frederick Douglass could qualify as "representative" of the African American experience. Granted, in framing her discussion in terms of ideology critique – as part of a "survey of the general terrain of images and stereotypes produced by antebellum sexual ideologies"[14] – Carby never came to focus on the specific questions of aesthetic form which the *Cambridge Companion to Slavery in American Literature* attempts to place squarely in the foreground. Yet beneath her feminist intervention lies an implicit lesson about the relationship of slavery to literary form – as we can demonstrate by turning to Douglass's narrative for a point of comparison.

The *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass*, after all, was no less reliant on literary codes and conventions. Most visibly, it was structured in relation to the tradition of exemplary autobiography, thus enabling Douglass to represent himself, and to be received, as "an exemplary black leader in the spiritual tradition of consecrated patriarchs and in the political tradition of American revolutionaries," as Robert Levine has put it.[15] Benjamin Franklin's autobiography in particular is an obvious literary analogue.[16] And this goes to Carby's point: if the prestige of such literary-cultural reference points seems somehow to qualify Douglass's narrative as partaking in the structure of universal (that is, male) experience, Jacobs's intertextual connections, on the other hand, are supposed to mark a particularized (that is, female) form of cultural dependency and a vitiating indebtedness to literary clichés. It is true that both texts emplot slavery in specifically gendered ways; even so, there is far more in common between the textual strategies these two authors employ than this gender-divided critical terrain might lead us to believe.

The most illuminating aspects of how both Douglass and Jacobs establish links to prior texts are those moments when the link reaches its limit, and the structure of analogy breaks down. Thus, for example, Douglass's story of moving from slavery to freedom ("how a slave was made a man"[17]) certainly does run parallel to Franklin's story of moving from indenture to economic and moral self-determination ("I took upon me to assert my freedom"[18]). Yet it is also clear that these parallel lines – to continue the geometric metaphor – can never actually meet. The reader of Douglass's narrative learns this as early as the first paragraph:

> I was born in Tuckahoe, near Hillsborough, and about twelve miles from Easton, in Talbot county, Maryland. I have no accurate knowledge of my

> age, never having seen any authentic record containing it ... The nearest estimate I can give makes me now between twenty-seven and twenty-eight years of age. I come to this, from hearing my master say, some time during 1835, I was about seventeen years old.[19]

This is a truly remarkable opening to an autobiography. More than merely telling readers, it strikingly shows them that the author lacks the most basic kind of information he needs even to commence his own life story. (Aside from not knowing his date of birth and current age, he goes on to add his ignorance of the identity of his father.) Of these and other details, Douglass writes, "I know nothing; the means of knowing was withheld from me."[20] The most basic touch-points of a "Life" are not only absent, but unrecoverable. In a conventional autobiography, their absence would constitute a major authorial lapse – and would even, by extension, signal the lack of a masculine discursive authority grounded in rationality and access to information. Here, however, the narrative calls deliberate attention to these gaps in order to make a complex argument: the lack of information is an essential principle of the slave's carefully policed subjectivity, and hence it becomes a structuring principle of the slave's autonarrative. And this marks the central formal problem of the *Narrative*. "Autobiography" – etymologically, a "self-life-writing" – will only be possible once its three constitutive elements are present. The protagonist must reclaim a "self" from a structure designed to destroy it. He must raise that self from a condition of mere physical subsistence to an ontological condition that can be called "life" (from bare life to politically qualified life, in the terms of philosopher Giorgio Agamben).[21] Finally, this emergent subject must supply himself with the means to turn that life into writing – that is, he must acquire literacy.

In formal terms, the lesson is this: to tell the story of slavery may require one to adopt certain literary models, but to adapt those models to the purpose is to encounter the ways in which the slave's story eludes or frustrates the conventions of the adopted form. To return to Harriet Jacobs, then, this complex dynamic between emulation and deviation, adoption and adaptation, is precisely what any reading of *Incidents* as merely derivative of literary models crucially fails to register. The text does not imitate formal conventions; it manipulates them, in both positive and negative ways. On the one hand, Jacobs cannily recruits generic conventions with which antebellum readers would be familiar in order to guide their affective responses; on the other hand, slavery repeatedly makes it impossible for Jacobs to replicate certain conventions. The narrative offers up many examples of this tension, but none more poignant – and from the perspective of its antebellum readership, none more shocking – than the

way Jacobs navigates the dangerous territory of sexual relations under slavery. Long before the famous reference to the conventional marriage resolution in the penultimate paragraph of the narrative, *Incidents* fearlessly exposes the treacherous emotional stakes of the question. What there is of a love story here revolves around the possibility of marriage to the free-born African American man she loves, but this desirable narrative possibility is disrupted by the destructive threat of sexual violation embodied by her master. To restate this in literary terms, then, a courtship plot is interrupted by a seduction plot – a displacement marked by the movement between chapter 7 (entitled "The Lover") and chapter 10 ("A Perilous Passage in the Slave Girl's Life").

Yet what is most revolutionary about the way *Incidents* navigates this "perilous passage" is that Jacobs narrates a third course between longed-for marriage to a beloved and dreaded rape by a master: namely, she offers herself as a sexual partner to a third man, hoping to preempt the sexual coercion of her master by choosing another white man as object. In the terms of the dominant sexual mores of the period, this was a decision to give away her virtue rather than have it stolen from her. Thus Jacobs describes it, unmistakably and unflinchingly, as a forfeiture of her own virtue – a "headlong plunge" into sexual impurity.[22] Not only does she represent this transaction as consensual; more remarkably still, she refuses to take refuge in the posture of the naive innocent, nor to mask her own agency behind that of a male seducer – both time-honored tropes of the seduction plot. "I will not try to screen myself behind the plea of compulsion from a master; for it was not so. Neither can I plead ignorance or thoughtlessness ... I knew what I did, and I did it with deliberate calculation."[23] Narrating the process quite literally from within, Jacobs asks the nineteenth-century reader to inhabit the mind of a woman who surrenders her most valuable possession, and forces that reader to confront the question of what circumstances would lead one to do so. If this still counts as a seduction story, it is one far more devastating than those of the countless fictional heroines swooning into unconsciousness at the moment of violation, tricked into sex through sophistry, or coerced through some other means. Jacobs's story cuts deeper, not only because it is an autobiographical representation rather than an iteration of a fictional formula, but, more importantly, because she represents herself as fully cognizant – as carnally knowing. In this striking inversion of the conventional seduction topos, Jacobs pointedly relinquishes a feminine moral authority grounded in innocence and unknowing, just as Frederick Douglass's confessions of ignorance at the beginning of his *Narrative* compromise his claim to the marks of normative masculinity. If the subject of Douglass's narrative knows too little ("the means of knowing was

withheld from me"),[24] the subject of *Incidents* knows too much ("the influences of slavery had . . . made me prematurely knowing").[25]

In different but structurally analogous ways, then, both authors simultaneously emulate and depart from generic conventions – and they do so in order to make a profound point about the relationship between slavery and literary form. Slavery stops them from telling a certain kind of story, and forces them to tell quite another. This narrative strategy relies on the reader's knowledge of the conventions on which the author is self-consciously drawing, yet at the same time, it derives its power from the author's resistance to those same conventions. This complex formal manipulation, it might be argued, is the most powerful weapon in these authors' writerly arsenals. It is also what makes these two particular narratives such enduring works of literature.

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I have spent some time developing these two textual examples in detail in order to model one version of an interpretive approach focused on literary form – one, that is, in which formal questions are not an afterthought, nor a merely "aesthetic" matter set apart from the historical and ideological forces at work in and around these texts, but something integral to our understanding of those forces. From this perspective, the aesthetic and the historical are of a piece. That is to say, these are not arguments couched in literary forms; they are arguments inseparable from literary form itself. My wager is that by applying this kind of reading to a couple of texts already familiar to most readers of this *Companion*, I might suggest at the outset what kinds of insights such an approach can generate – even when the form in question, prose narrative, is one generally not closely attended to for its aesthetic dimensions.

Yet the collection of essays that follows ranges far beyond these familiar antebellum examples in several ways. The most obvious axis of expansion is chronological: taken together, the authors of the individual chapters below confront the long literary and cultural history of American slavery from the early eighteenth century to the early twenty-first. And, along with this historical sweep, comes an explicit attention to the transformations of "slavery" as a cultural object and the variability of the generic forms that attempt to make sense of it. In the eighteenth century, "slavery" could have distinct meanings and cultural associations quite apart from the expropriation of the labor of African persons and their descendants by European persons and theirs. In enlightenment philosophy, as Philip Gould explores in Chapter 1, "enslavement" was a moral and psychological condition in which a person is unable to exercise one's will, one's reason, and, by

extension, one's moral sense. This broader meaning of "slavery" made it possible, for example, for Anglo-American revolutionaries to appropriate the concept for their polemics against British tyranny. In so doing, they forged a cautionary story of Anglo-American enslavement that managed to coexist with their own subjection of persons of African descent, not only to a condition of economic enslavement, but to a legal identity as chattel. Even into and through the nineteenth century, when slavery became increasingly cemented to the concept of race in the Anglo-American cultural imagination, the "slave" did not always and everywhere mean the black person. As Joe Shapiro explains in Chapter 3, American literature continued to be haunted throughout the nineteenth century by the notion of the "white slave," a cultural figure comprehending the Anglo-American captives of North African pirates in the 1790s, exploited white male "wage slaves" in the industrializing decades of the mid nineteenth century, and the striking "mill girls" of late-nineteenth-century Lowell, Massachusetts, and others. This multilayered discourse of "white slavery" thus developed alongside the reality of African-American chattel slavery, and necessarily existed in an explicit or implicit relation to it.

Meanwhile, Anglo-American representations of black slavery were no less complex and variable over the period in question. A century before a certain big book by a little woman started a great war (to invoke the lines President Lincoln allegedly uttered upon meeting Harriet Beecher Stowe), writers on both sides of the Atlantic took up the pen to turn their readers against its institutional practices. From the beginning, the writers who set out to account for slavery participated not only in traditions of rhetorical persuasion, but also a set of aesthetic traditions. The antislavery tract, that is, was a vehicle of political argumentation – that much is obvious – but also a genre of writing. The foundational American antislavery writers of the mid eighteenth century, Anthony Benezet and John Woolman, were notable and influential for their ability to recruit oral forms of rhetoric from the sermon and the political oration and adapt them to the media of modern print culture. But especially as the form developed during the early nineteenth century, antislavery writing increasingly adapted images and themes from a broad range of literary genres to powerful effect. As Teresa A. Goddu demonstrates in Chapter 2, during the foundational decade of the 1830s, the gothic and the sentimental were the two primary literary modes working, together and separately, to frame the idea of slavery for Anglophone readers in America. *Uncle Tom's Cabin* (1852) thus arrived at the latter end of a long cultural and literary development that preceded it and made it possible.

But not all Anglo-American novels or narratives about slavery had the dehumanizing experience of slavery as their center of gravity. Accounts of slave rebellions, mutinies, and even large-scale revolutions of former slave populations in the Atlantic world constituted a fascinating subset of the accounts of slavery, and one worth considering on its own terms. For one thing, such stories necessarily modeled a different set of character types, plot structures, and forms of reader address than the sentimental forms of the slave's story. Moreover, as Paul Giles demonstrates in Chapter 11, no treatment of the subject can remain delimited to the southern United States. Even for North American readers, the primal scene was the revolution in Saint-Domingue and its reverberations throughout the Atlantic world – first, by means of newspaper reports and accounts, and later in the century (not coincidentally, on the eve of the American Civil War), with the publication of longer works about Toussaint L'Ouverture and Dessaline. The reportage of slave rebellion in the United States all took place in a cultural context first defined by this Atlantic history and continuing to resonate with it, as did fictional works dealing with the subject from the 1850s until the present day.

Antebellum accounts of slavery were, of course, not always aimed at a critique of the institution. With increasing intensity in the decade just prior to the Civil War, the perceived need in some cultural quarters for a vigorous defense of an embattled institution gave rise to an explicitly proslavery literature, whose most familiar expressions were proslavery tracts but which also included the plantation novels treated by Gavin Jones and Judith Richardson in Chapter 6. As a literary-historical matter, what is perhaps most engaging about these novels is that they revolved around many of the same generic, characterological, and stylistic features as the antislavery tracts, narratives, and novels to which they responded, yet redeployed these features for the opposite political and ideological purpose. This raises the crucial question of what a literary approach to proslavery made possible that traditional political, philosophical, economic, or religious arguments could not as effectively perform. Yet if many of the chapters of this collection thus ask what literary "form" contributed to the "subject matter" of slavery, Robert S. Levine turns this question on its head in Chapter 8 – asking instead what impact slavery might have had on a canonical literary works generally thought to say little about the subject while offering much in the way of formal-aesthetic mastery. Questioning the notion that "classic" American literature from Cooper to Hawthorne and Melville largely evaded the problem of slavery, Levine traces a deep engagement of these works with the subject – an engagement no less significant for being less polemical.

By far the most historically significant genre to emerge during the period in which the institution of slavery was active was, of course, the slave narrative. Starting in the eighteenth century, men and women of African descent took up the pen to describe the experience of enslavement from within. From the beginning, black antislavery writing incorporated features from a broad range of literary genres – spiritual autobiography, captivity narratives, travel narratives, and sea voyages – thereby not only participating in political and philosophical arguments about slavery's legitimacy, but also supplementing "argument" with literary form. In this paradoxical way, some former slaves thus made their way out of one sort of transatlantic trade and went into another: by telling the story of their experiences as living commodities, they positioned their writings as literary commodities. These eighteenth-century writers could not have fathomed that, as they did so, they inaugurated an African American literary tradition that would have such a profound impact on American culture. Yet as that tradition gathered momentum in the course of the nineteenth century, it became increasingly aware of its location, not only in a cultural argument about slavery, but also in a literary market. In Chapter 4, Sarah Meer approaches the question of the "literariness" of the slave narrative by crucially recovering the sense of the "literary" that would have prevailed at the time these authors wrote; only then can we ask how the slave narratives positioned themselves in relation to their contemporary literary culture. Meer places a particular focus on the intertextual dimensions of slave narratives – their structure of citation to prior texts – as one of the crucial means by which slave authors established their access to literary tradition and, by extension, asserted their belonging in a transatlantic republic of letters. And this was precisely what, in turn, made the emergence of the African American novelist possible.

Towards the middle of the nineteenth century (to adapt Virginia Woolf's famous lines from *A Room of One's Own*), a change came about of greater importance than the Civil War: African Americans began to write fiction.[26] Inasmuch as nearly all antebellum African American fiction centrally concerned the experience of slavery, and some fictions were either composed or received as fictionalized autobiographies, the boundary between slave narratives and the earliest African American novels has been famously difficult to fix with any precision. Literary historians have lent some degree of clarity to the issue by means of periodization (autobiographical genres predominating in the 1840s and fictional treatments of slavery emerging with force in the 1850s), or through juxtaposition (of Douglass's 1845 *Narrative* and his 1853 novella "The Heroic Slave," for example, or of William Wells Brown's 1847 *Narrative* and his 1853 novel *Clotel*), but these heuristics do not do much to define the precise nature of the generic boundary. Yet in the