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Vitez, Natalija

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Natalija Vitez

THE AFRICAN AMERICAN IDENTITY, SLAVERY, AND SLAVE NARRATIVE

Submitted in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the B.A. in English Language and Literature and Croatian Language and Literature at the University of Rijeka

Supervisor:

Dr.sc. Tatjana Vukelić

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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this thesis is to present the period of slavery and some hardships that African American people were faced with. But even more importantly, to show the awakening of their unique voice through slave narratives, inspired by African origins mixed with new American surroundings, not to mention fashioned by the life in bondage, being considered less worthy than whites, and finally the black resistance. In my research, I relied mostly on the works encompassed in *The Cambridge companion to the African American Slave Narrative* and the *Encyclopedia of African American* History. For a better comprehension of the history of slavery I also used the book *Slavery and anti-slavery A history of the great struggle in both hemispheres*, along with a few internet sources. Finally, the work *River flows on* helped me trace the origins of African American culture and identity.

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INTRODUCTION

The African American struggle for equality and identity can be observed from their earliest writings. The blacks even had to prove themselves, their abilities and intellect to the biased white population in America, which they accomplished through their slave narratives. In order to understand how and why the narratives were formed the way they were, an examination of the history and conditions of that time is essential. The first section of this paper, therefore, deals with the history of slavery in the United States, including the anti-slavery organizations, slave resistance and the formation of the African American identity. The second section delves into the emergence, circulation, reception, features, and importance of the slave narrative genre. This section also includes the female perspective towards the institution of slavery and their written experiences. Finally, for the third section I chose some notable slave narrative authors. Unfortunately, this paper is not long enough to include all the authors, but I chose those whom I consider to be of utmost importance if one would want to get familiar with the genre.

1. SLAVERY, RESISTANCE, AND AFRICAN AMERICAN IDENTITY

1.1. History of slavery in the Unites States

Even though slavery has quite a long history, nowhere did it assume such proportions as it did on American continent. Slavery had been practiced in africa, in Spanish colonies as early as 1503, and by English during the reign of Elizabeth. In British North America, the first African slaves were brought to Jamestown, Virginia in the Chesapeake colonies. Twenty of them came aboard a Dutch trading ship in 1619. Transportation was a nightmare, so the survival rate on these voyages was quite low at first. Initially, the first Africans imported were not treated as slaves but as indentured servants. They were needed to work on tobacco plantations. But the growing plantation economy demanded more and more workforce and slaves became a better bargain than servants. Especially since slave women would bear children and practically replenished the labor supply for their owner (Alexander and Rucker 57).

Interestingly, in the 17th century there was much less discrimination than in the following centuries. Some blacks were never enslaved, and for those who were, it was possible to obtain freedom, prosper as small planters, and even have slaves of their own. An example is a black man Anthony Johnson. He was a tobacco planter and a slaveholder. When his slave, John Casor, escaped, hiding at white neighbours, Johnson successfully sued in court for Casor's return (Alexander and Rucker 56). When slavery was first introduced there were no colonial enactments that authorized, defined, or regulated slavery. However, as slaves proved to be a dependable and cheaper workers, the situation quickly changed for the worse. Slaveholders were intent on gaining tighter control over slaves, especially after Bacon's rebellion in 1676. Nathaniel Bacon, along with white indentured servants and black Virginian men, rebelled against the ruler of the colony.

In New England colonies slavery was more urban than rural. Majority of urban slaves worked as domestic servants and lived in the same household as slaveholders, but they carried out a variety of jobs in the city as well. Some even lived in the city, in boarding houses or in homes of free blacks. Unlike those living in rural, agrarian places, especially in the harsh South, urban slaves were much more connected with others and generally in a better position in the community. Of course, slaveholders tried to restrict their freedom as much as possible fearing salve insurrection. Armed patrols, segregation, and public punishments were introduced. Nevertheless, urban slaves were more independent and enjoyed more liberties, and lived immensely better than their rural counterparts. Those who worked on farms in the North lived virtually in the same conditions as slaves in the South. The only difference is that farming was not as profitable in the North. Because of that the slave population was considerably smaller and they usually worked on medium-size farms. Owners also often hired them out to increase their income.

Between New England in the North and Chesapeake states[1] in the South were positioned the middle colonies of Pennsylvania, New York, and New Jersey. Due to the geographical location, ideas, economics, and customs from north and south collided in the middle colonies, creating a distinct colonial identity. African Americans in the middle colonies started as slaves, which transformed to wage labor through emancipation programs that developed during the American Revolution along with Enlightenment ideas. (Alexander and Rucker 70) After the Emancipation, however, discrimination and many restrictions for black people remained strong.

A momentuous period in the U.S. history is the American Revolution, when colonists decided to free themselves from England's firm grasp. The period also made clear the hypocrisy of the colonists when it comes to African Americans. A theory of natural law was developed thanks

[1] Maryland, Delaware, and Virginia

to the rise of Enlightenment and scholars like John Locke. The laws included the right to life, liberty, and private property. This raised many questions about slavery, as well as provoked black political activism. Black people started demanding their freedom publicly. They drew on the Declaration of Independence from 1776, the founding document that announced the United States' split from England. Declaration played a seminal role in African Americans' quest for equality.

The American Revolution era began shortly after 1760 when King George III decided to impose taxes and other restrictions on Americans as a compensation for their financial expenses during the Seven Years War. (Alexander and Rucker 170) Colonists revolted against England, which ultimately led to a full-scale war. Black people participated in the Revolutionary war on both the American and British sides. They fought in hopes to earn freedom, equality, and finally become incorporated into society. On July 10, 1775 George Washington decided to ban black men from military service. His prohibition suited the opposing side, so the British leader and governor of Virginia at the time, Lord Dunmore, seized the opportunity. He issued a proclamation allowing black men to fight alongside the British in exchange for their freedom. In fear of disaster, Washington changed his position immediately after the proclamation. By the end of the war, over 5,000 black men served as soldiers on the American side (Alexander and Rucker 311). As might be expected, black soldiers were placed on the front lines more frequently than the white soldiers, they were usually the lowest ranking and lowest paid. Despite the hopes and promises, at the conclusion of the war not many achieved the desired liberty. Among those who managed to depart with the defeated British, only lucky few gained freedom. Many were brought to the British Carribean and were re-enslaved. Those who fought with the Americans did not get their happy ending either, their freedom denied and unappreciated.

In the end, the American Revolution had a mixed legacy. Athough the Enlightenment philosphy ultimately brought an end to slavery in the North, the institution of slaver in the South expanded dramatically after the Revolutionary war. One of the early changes in the now sovereign state of United States was the abolition of slave trade. On January 1, 1808 Congress prohibited the importation of slaves into America.

Second half of the 19th century saw more big changes, notably in relation to the institution of slavery. In 1861, Abraham Lincoln was elected as the 16th president of the United States. He was the first president who publicly denounced slavery as immoral. But his personal relationship to slavery was complex, since Lincoln married a woman from a slaveholding family. Moreover, he was an admirer of the politician Henry Clay[2]. Still, Lincoln's objective was to bring slavery to an end. It was an endeavour that he accomplished with the Emancipation Proclamation and, finally, with the Thirteenth Amendment.

Upon Lincoln's presidential election, many slaveholders were worried that he will eliminate slavery. A conflict over the issue of slavery divided the country into the Union (the North) and the Confederacy (the South). Very soon the conflict led to the Civil War, the bloodiest war in American history. The war lasted four long years, from 1861 to 1865. In 1863, Emancipation Proclamation declared slaves in areas of rebellion free if the Union Army won the Civil War. Of course, the proclamation received a lot of negative cticism. Some soldiers in the Union Army even mutinied. Supporters of the proclamation, on the other hand, believed it was a great weapon for the Unionists. However, the proclamation was just a war measure. Lincoln was aware that in order to outlaw slavery, the Constitution needed to be amended. For this reason he made every effort to pass the Thirteenth Amendment. With the Union victory, on December 18, 1865, Congress passed the amendment, which freed slaves nationally.

[2] Henry Clay formulated the Compromise of 1850, a part of which was the Fugitive Slave Act of 1850; the Act made it easier for owners to reclaim their runaway slaves

More changes for African Americans occured during the Reconstruction Era, such as the Civil Rirhts Acts of 1866 and 1875, the fourteenth Amendment which granted them citizenship and equal protection, and the Fifteenth Amendmenth, that granted suffrage to all male Americans. The period of Reconstruction ended in 1877 with the withdrawal of federal troops from the south. Despite the optimistic new start after the war, the hardships for African Americans were not over. Before the end of the century Jim Crow segregation was enforced and lasted until 1965, lynching became a common occurence, claiming a great number of victims, and of course racism, present to this very day.

1.2. Black resistance and organizations

Since the dawn of slavery, there have been acts of resistance. The most famous, or infamous, slave revolt happened in Virginia, on August 1831. Nat Turner and 70 other blacks, both free and enslaved, went to slaughter a many whites as they could and free their slaves. Turner was a deeply religious man who believed that God sent him on this mission. They visited houses and managed to kill 55 white people with knives and hatchets. After the rebellion was suppressed, Turner went into hiding. He was eventually discovered, sentenced to death, and executed in Jerusalem, Virginia. Another 48 black people were charged and 18 of them ended up sentenced to death.

Escaping from bondage is a form of resistance as well. Despite the threat of severe punishments if caught, a great number of slaves was willing to take that risk in hopes of a better life. It was not an easy task and majority of them was unsuccessful. Some of those who did manage to get away devoted themselves to helping other fugitives. One loosely organized system consisting of a network of escape routes and people willing to help became known as the Underground Railroad. (Alexander and Rucker 560) When the railroad was

developed is uncertain, but it is known that Quakers[3] had a system for helping fugitive slaves as early as 1787.

The most famous active conductor on the Underground Railroad was Harriet Tubman. Born in 1822 in Maryland, she escaped from slavery in 1849. Historians have documented that she was personally responsible for at least a dozen trips with approximately 75 rescued. Her activity with the Underground Railroad ceased during the Civil War, when she focused on supporting the Union cause. Among many jobs which she performed during the conflict, her most notable work is assisting hundreds of slaves in leaving plantations following the Emancipation Proclamation.

Essential in the fight for the rights of black people were antislavery societies. The first ever was organized in 1775 by Philadelphia Quakers, while the first national antislavery organization, titled the American Anti-Slavery Society (AASS), was founded in 1833. Internal disagreements escalated in 1840 when the President Arthur Tappan resigned and left the organization along with Lewis Tappan and their followers. Later they established the American and Foreign Anti-Slavery Society. With the departure of Tappanites, Garrisonian principles of nonviolence, gender equality, and political disengagement prevailed. William Lloyd Garrison, one of the most important American abolitionists in the 19th century, assumed presidency in 1843 and held the position until the end of the Civil War. He stepped down as the president in 1865 with a firm belief that the work of the organization completed with the passing of the Thirteenth Amendment. The remaining members believed that the purpose of the organization will be fulfilled only when blacks receive the same legal rights as whites. For them, that moment came with the ratification of the Fifteenth Amendment in 1870. On April 9, AASS officially disbanded.

[3] A denomination of Christianity founded in 1650s, strongly opposed to slavery

While the society was active, many renowned African Americans worked for it. Frederick Douglass and William Wells Brown, for instance, both became paid lecturers for AASS upon escaping from bondage.

1.3. The African American identity and culture

When African slaves came to America they were forced to adapt swiftly to new conditions. Their African American identity was fashioned by various aspects through time. Slaveholders tried to strip slaves of their African identity and make them but property. First and foremost, masters changed their names. But in spite of the efforts, masters failed to erase the African identity of their slaves. African culture continued in the United States

The cultural roots of black people are, of course, in Africa. The folklore originated there, the tradition of oral culture, and their religion, which included belief in magic and ancestral spirits. Apart from the good ghosts of their loved ones, African Americans also believed in evil spirits of their old masters. A form of folk magic and healing, called conjure, was one method of protection from these evil ghosts. It is an American tradition, but its roots are primarily in African cosmology and herbalism. Conjurers were quite common presence and appear in a number of slave narratives. William Wells Brown noted that at least one conjurer existed on nearly every large plantation. (Rucker 183). Even Frederick Douglass turned to a conjurer for help because of the savage beating from his master Edward Covey. Although Douglass found these beliefs absurd, he still acquired the root the conjurer told him to find. Douglass wore it in his pocket during a confrontation with Covey, after which his master never hurt him again. When they were introduced to Christianity, black people accepted it, but incorporated their old beliefs with it. A unique form of Christianity was thus formed.

Oral tradition is the most renowned aspect of black folk culture, especially folk tales and songs. Blacks have told sacred and supernatural tales, as well as secular tales. The most

famous tales are animal trickster stories. The trickster figure usually symbolized blacks and it would prevail in interaction with a more powerful animal character, which represented whites[4]. Brer Rabbit is one well-known animal trickster, who outsmarts his counterparts and escapes a tricky situation. It is widely considered that Brer Rabbit represents blacks, even though it's personality is quite strange. It oscillates, according to Michael P. Carroll, between a "clever hero" and "selfish buffoon". (Alexander and Rucker 170)

The songs were in many parts of Africa used as a means of communication, of maintaining connection with each others. The songs which Africans brought with them to America were spiritual in nature. Slaves would gather to listen to their preachers and song songs together.

Slaves also retained their folk arts and crafts, such as quilting and woodwork, not to mention left a rich legacy of literature. They created notable poems, slave narratives, etc.

One more crucial aspect of the African American identity is Black English[5]. Regarded as a language variety of American English language, it is spoken by many, though not all black people. The most widely accepted theory about its origin is known as the creolist theory. According to the theory, when slaves first came in contact with the Europeans, they developed a simplistic way of communicating called a pidgin. Pidgin in turn became a Creole when it was the primary language. Eventually, the language has gone through the process of decreolization and so the modern Black English was formed. (Alexander and Rucker 149) Unfortunately, Black English is usually viewed negatively in the United States. It is associated, often inaccurately, with low intelligence, poor status, and bad personality traits.

All of this proves that masters could not suffocate the potent African American culture, nor stop a formation of the unique identity, created from a mix of various African ethnolinguistic groups and harsh living conditions in the New World. Even the rebellions and resistance of

[4] As John Wesley Blassingame noted, the slave culture "acted as a form of resistance to enslavement" and the folklore "lightened the burden of oppression, promoted group solidarity, provided ways for verbalizing anger, sustained hope, and built self-esteem." (Alexander and Rucker 260)

[5] Known also as Black Vernacular English (BVE), African American English (AAE), African American Vernacular English (AAVE), and Ebonics

the enslaved people played an important role in the creation of the African American culture and consciousness (Rucker 199).

2. SLAVE NARRATIVE

2.1 Features and importance of the slave narrative

Slave narrative, as one definiton says, is "an account of the life, or a major portion of the life, of a fugitive or former slave, either written or orally related by the slave personally." (*Slave Narrative.* Enyclopedia Britannica Online) Of course, there is much more to say about the nature of these texts. The narratives are actually complex, hybrid writings. They are actually a mix of genres, including spiritual autobiography, captivity narrative, a documentary, important political works, and even incorporating some Romantic tendencies.

Desire for a change is in the core of the African-American slave narrative. Primarily it was a collective endeavour to abolish the slavery, a struggle against the inhumane treatment of a large number of people based on the blackness of their skin. Abolition was the fundamental goal, but there was one more, although connected to the abolition. The writers shared their own experiences, their lives and struggles as slaves. This made the narratives personal, but still connected to the ultimate cause, which was to end the slavery. The purpose of these narratives was partly to relieve their own souls, and partly a desire to be acknowledged as human beings, by attempting to make the whites see the horror that they had created. It was a struggle to form and reveal their African-American identity. Many of them were imported into America, having had to adapt and incorporate new aspects into their own persona. The blacks were by no means clean slates until this, but it would not be right to say that they had a completely formed identity in America either, because one needs to be acknowledged by others too. Therefore, they needed to prove to others as well as themselves who they are. The blacks were a property, perceived as less than humans. In this context the slave narratives had become their way to rise from nothingness. Through them the blacks were able to show their intelligence, their worth, their dignity.

The importance of the slave narrative genre is actually threefold. To former slaves it was firstly an account of their lives and hardships, a testimony, a way to communicate with whites during the 18th and 19th centuries. Secondly, it was a battlefield and a powerful political instrument for achieving their abolitionist aspirations. Finally, the narratives serve us today as historical documents. In the last sense, they are chronicles of white supremacy in the South, showing political and social situation, but, even more important, they intimately expose the horrible ill-treatment of slaves on Southern plantations.

An autobiography serves as a testimony of one's life. When it comes to a fugitive or former slave, it is a verification of their humanity, abilities, and worth. African Americans started asserting themselves, spoke directly to whites, but also inspired their own people. They were determined to fight for their lives and rights. Once they started exposing all the evils of slavery, change in the public mentality was inevitable, albeit slow.

One significant aspect in many of the early narratives is spirituality. Black people combined their African culture and religion with Christianity into a unique form, which underscored physical and spiritual liberation (Alexander and Rucker 261). Christianity, after all, promises redemption, especially for those wrongly punished. (Sinanan 74) Spiritual, religious elements are incorporated, for instance, in the narratives of Olaudah Equiano and Boston King. Their works were marketed primarily as spiritual memoirs. (Sinanan 73) Religion in the slave South was even portrayed as a “perversion of true Christianity“ (Bruce 30).

The antebellum slave narratives, on the other hand, focused on exposing the evils of the Southern plantation. They provided detailed daily conditions of slave life and claimed that slavery corrupted everything and everyone it touched. Thus, the antebellum narratives became documentaries. Narratives were, among other things, always highly political texts. They had a major impact on antebellum debates over slavery and even pushed forward certain changes.

2.2. Development and circulation of the slave narrative

The slave narrative emerged during the 1770s and 1780s and the name of Olaudah Equiano is mentioned as a founder of the genre with his work *The Interesting Narrative of the Life of Olaudah Equiano, or Gustavus Vassa, the African. Written by Himself*, published in 1789. Equiano drew upon Enlightenment authorities to provide reasons against slavery. The English philosopher John Locke particularly influenced writers of the time, black writers included. The antislavery authors reinterpreted Locke's secular social philosophy and used it to underscore the absurdity of equating human being with material possessions, as it was the case with the black slaves (Gould 17). In 1689, Locke published his essay called *Two Treatises of Government*, in which he stated that monarchies have no divine right to exist and that a government should exist only by the consent of the governed. The essay exerted some influence on the American Revolution, however it is unclear to which extent. Some parts of it are also echoed in the Declaration of Independence, whose author Thomas Jefferson was one of the notable figures who accepted the ideas of the Enlightenment.

Many antislavery movements arose in the late eighteenth century and are considered to be the results of the Enlightenment ideas, the rise of sentimentalism which promoted sympathy and benevolence, and the appearance of radical, revolutionary ideas about natural rights of a person and social forms of authority. Precisely in this context had the slave narrative come to light. Evangelical Christian groups, as well as organizations like the English Society for Effecting the Abolition of the Slave Trade and the Pennsylvania Abolition Society were the ones who promoted, sponsored, and published the slave narratives (Gould 11). They supported black writers and activists like Equiano and generated numerous antislavery books, pamphlets, epistles, institutional reports and proceedings, published sermons, orations, and created a lot of visual materials which showed the terrible circumstances in which the slaves

live. (Gould 16) The organizations were quite active politicaly in the attempts to end slavery. The narratives were greatly fashioned by the political context of the time, but they influenced it as well. Slave narrative helped to pave the path to abolition.

Moreover, many slave narrators were renown speakers before they became writers. In fact, the abolitionist lecture circuit was quite important for the formation of style and content of the antebellum slave narrative. Some narrators, like Frederick Douglass and Henry Box Brown, gained international fame by giving public lectures about the evils of slavery in Britain and Europe. Henry Box Brown, for instance, a well-known speaker for the Anti-Slavery Society (ASS) became a narrator due to his oratory gift and eventually published his autobiography *Narrative of the Life of Henry Box Brown*. Brown is known for openly criticizing slavery and expressing his negative feelings about the state of America.

As expression was the weapon for ex-slaves, the abolitionist forum proved to be their best battlefield. Large number of oral testimonies, ex-slave speeches, were published by abolitionist newspapers and periodicals as "written" narratives. In their expression slaves used not only their words, but their bodies as well in order to convey the story. They would sometimes bare their backs for proof. In a way they were characters in a story who finally gained voices and came to life.

From the very beginning, the slave narrative was a success, being a popular genre on both sides of the Atlantic. There are no exact sales figures for the eighteenth century, but it is known for sure that between the 1770s and 1810s the narratives of Gronniosaw, Marrant, and Equiano sold incredibly well and went through multiple editions (Gould 21). The works were first published in london, later in Dublin and Edinburgh, sometimes America. A wide readership existed due to combining multiple genres, many adventures, motifs of captivity and escape, and even a dash of exotic, all of which the slave narrative genre successfully incorporated.

When it comes to reviews, not unlike the narratives themselves, they were often highly political. Literary evaluation was inseparable from the political debates over the issue of slavery and the status of black people in society. Still, as the slave narrative between the 1770s and 1840s became part of the capitalist literary market, and in association with the rising abolitionist sentiment, the genre and its reviews were promoted. The appearance of larger publishing firms in America, which brought greater resources, improved printing technology, and easier distribution, remarkably changed the economic situation not only of the slave narrators, but of the printers, publishers, and abolitionist patrons too. Even the abolitionist societies themselves sometimes assumed the role of publisher.

As a result, antebellum narratives reached wider audiences and sold significantly better than the earlier slave narratives. This, however, does not mean that black writers were not subject to editorial manipulations, even those sponsored by antislavery constituencies. Nevertheless, by 1850s the slave narrative was accepted as an important genre in the American literary culture. Even though not all reviewers embraced it as a high form of literature, they still recognized it as a distinctly American autobiography.

2.3. Female perspective

Formerly enslaved women were just as active as men. They joined abolitionist movements, helped fugitives, worked as speakers and lecturers, organizers, and fundraisers. But as terrible as the conditions were for male slaves, the women had it worse. They were positioned even lower on the social scale and their owners very often abused them sexually. They had the power to compel slave women to submit to them, and, perhaps the most horrible part, the children that were begotten this way had no more value to them than any other slave. When a suitable buyer appeared, slaveholders would sell their own children.

In *My Bondage and My Freedom*, Frederick Douglass described the vicious beating of his aunt Hester, simply because she dared to refuse her owner's constant sexual advances toward her (Bruce 32). Still, the message was much stronger when the story came directly from women who experienced it. But their stories were not just theirs, they were actually the stories of all black women who went through sexual or any other abuse and remained quiet. The unrivaled antebellum account of sexual exploitation in the South is *Incidents of a Slave Girl* by Harriet Jacobs. The topic of sexual abuse is also covered in *The Narrative of Sojourner Truth: A Northern Slave*. As Sojourner was an analphabete, she dictated her story to Olive Gilbert and William Lloyd Garrison published it. Truth was born into slavery in 1770. Upon escaping, she became a public speaker on the antislavery cause, women's rights, spiritualism, and non-violence (Alexander and Rucker 553). She was at the height of her popularity on the eve and during the Civil War. Her most famous speech *Ain't I a Woman?* was delivered in 1851 in Ohio at the Women's Rights Convention.

Apart from sexuality, slave women asserted their womanhood through motherhood, labor, entrepreneurship, spirituality, and collective responsibility. With narratives they tried to broaden the nation's understanding of how slave women asserted their femininity.

3. NOTABLE AUTHORS

Approximately a hundred narratives written by fugitive or former slaves appeared in the period from 1760 to the end of the Civil War[6] in the United States (*Slave Narrative.* Enyclopedia Britannica Online). Thanks to the Union victory and the ratification of the Thirteenth Amendment[7] to the Constitution in 1865, nearly four million slaves were freed. After the slavery was formally abolished, at least fifty more former slaves wrote or dictated accounts of their lives (*Slave Narrative.* Enyclopedia Britannica Online). Among the numerous authors during the 18th and 19th century, a few notable will be presented in this section.

OLAUDAH EQUIANO (1745 – 1797)

To start from the beginning, Olaudah Equiano is considered to be the founder of the African American salve narrative and his work, *The Interesting Narrative of te Life of Olaudah Equiano, or Gustavus Vassa, the African. Written by Himself*. The narrative was widely published and politically highly influential in helping to pass the Slave Trade Act of 1807[8]. Apart from that, it became the prototype for all subsequent narratives. The conventions it established can be found even in some modern autobiographies by African American authors, like Malcolm X or Toni Morrison.

In the *Interesting Narrative* Equiano stated that he was born in 1745 in Africa, enslaved at the age of eleven, sold to English slave traders and brought to Virginia. There he was purchased by Michael Pascal, who ironically renamed him Gustavus Vassa (Carretta 44). Pascal, a British officer, brought Equiano to London and later decided to sell him again. Eventually he

[6] American Civil War (1861-65)

[7] "Neither slavery nor involuntary servitude, except as a punishment for crime whereof the party shall have been duly convicted, shall exist within the United States, or any place subject to their jurisdiction." (*13th Amendment to the U.S. Constitution*. Primary Documents of American History)

[8] The Act abolished slave trade in the United States, making it illegal to import new slaves into America (*The Act of 1807*. The Abolition of the Slave Trade)

managed to save enough money and buy his own freedom in 1766. Equiano recounted many more episodes from his turbulent life, the fights he witnessed, his voyages, even a spiritual crisis and, in the end, a calm domestic life. With his wife and two daughters, Equiano was able to live comfortably thanks to his affluence and reputation as the most accomplished author of African descent.

When it comes to his origins, at the turn of the 21st century, discovery of new documents has cast doubt on Equiano's narrative. According to the documents, he may have been born in South Carolina instead of Africa, meaning that he invented both his origin and, consequently, his account of the Middle Passage. Other recently found evidence suggests that Equiano at least changed the year he first came to England, and that he was in fact a few years younger. In any case, he did change some parts of his life, undoubtedly to make the desired impression and provoke compassion in readers. If anything, this new evidence serves as a confirmation of his great literary talent.

FREDERICK DOUGLASS (1818 – 1895)

The epitome of the antebellum slave narrative is beyond doubt the *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, an American Slave, Written by Himself*. In his long life, Douglass published three autobiographies, one novella and quite a lot of speeches in pamphlet form. Furthermore, he delivered thousands of lectures, earning the title of one of America's best orators. Douglass also managed to run his newspaper for sixteen years, which makes it the longest-running black newspaper in the 19th century. He was brilliant with words and believed that "true"[9] art could break down racial barriers, that it could bring the power to a slave.

[9] It meant "accurate and authentic representations of himself and other blacks" (201)

Born in Maryland, after a harsh childhood in slavery, Douglass's new mistress in town, Sophia Auld, recognized his abilities and started to teach him to read. However, her husband Hugh put a stop to it. Frederick thus practiced and learned further on his own. The more knowledge he acquired, the more he despised his place and condition. (Alexander and Rucker 387) becoming a property of Master Hugh's brother, Captain Thomas Auld, Douglass was hired out to work for Edward Covey. Thomas Auld considered him a disobedient slave and Covey was known as a "slave breaker". On Covey's farm, Douglass endured regular beatings until he had finally had enough and fought back. He was never beaten again after that, but became determined to acquire freedom.

Assisted by friends in Baltimore, Douglass escaped on September 3, 1838. Among the friends was Anna Murray who later joined him and the two married. (Alexander and Rucker 388) They established a home in Bedford and had two daughters and three sons. After Anna's death, Douglass married one Helen Pitts, making a controversial alliance due to her being white and fairly younger than Frederick.

Douglass was a great activist who believed in the equality of all people, being particularly close with American feminists. As an activist, he considered oratory to be the most effective tool. He became a paid lecturer for William Lloyd Garrison's American Anti-Slavery Society. A regular salary made it possible for him to start a new life, to purchase a home, and lecture around the Northern States about slavery. His own story was mostly the focal point of the speeches, but people began doubting that he had ever been a slave. Douglass not only seemed too learned for a slave, but he also omitted some of the information about himself and his former master, to whom he actually still belonged, for protection. In response to such claims, Douglass began writing his *Narrative*, where he gave an accurate and detailed description of his life in bondage. Two months after publishing it, he sought refuge in England. The *Narrative* was a grand success. It was a bestseller and made him internationally famous.

(Stauffer 204) What made the narrative so appealing was the fact that it adhered to the genre, and yet, it was unique in its time. Especially fascinating is the language, which Douglass deemed of utmost value. Thus, he used the language itself as a mode of liberation in his work. (Stauffer 205)

In 1847 British admirers had raised enough money fo Douglass to purchase his freedom and start a newspaper *The North Star* (which later became *Frederick Douglass' Paper*). In that moment Douglass finally became both physically and emotionally free.

Due to this and the fact that he was no longer the same man he had been before, in 1855 Douglass published a second autobiography, *My Bondage and My Freedom*. It is a more complex book than the *Narrative*, a report of the changes in his life and his own personal declaration of independence.

WILLIAM WELLS BROWN (1815 – 1884)

Upon escaping from slavery in 1834, William Wells Brown became an antislavery activist and the most prolific author of his time. He was the second most renowned public persona, right after Frederick Douglass.

Born in Kentucky to a slave mother and a white father, Brown worked for a number of masters and was often hired out. Ruthless masters, many beatings and whippings were a common occurence for him, but perhaps the most distressing experience was when he was purchased by a slave trader and forced to help transport other slaves to New Orleans. Still, thanks to this job, Brown learned about the possibilities outside his own limited world. He grew more and more determined to break free. After one failed attempt with his mother, which resulted in her being sold and never seeing her son again. Brown got another chance when he was bought by a merchant Enoch Prince to work on his steamboat. When they docked in Cincinnati, he carried a trunk from the steamboat on the shore and just kept

walking. Surviving on his own for about three weeks, Brown met a Quaker named Wells Brown, who helped him escape to Cleveland. To express gratitude, Brown used Quaker's name.

In his new life, Brown got married, became active in the Underground Railroad and later moved to Boston to become a paid lecturer for the Anti-Slavery Society. Being a great success as an orator, Brown decided to write down his life story. Thus, in 1847 his *Narrative of William Wells Brown, a Fugitive Slave* was published. It was an immediate success, and Brown an influential former slave. In London he wrote *Clotel;or the President's Daughter* and became the first African American to write a novel. In 1854, members of the Anti-Slavery Society purchased his freedom and he could finally live safely in the United States, free of the threat of possible recapturing.

HARRIET ANN JACOBS (1813 – 1897)

Known also as “Hatty“, “Linda Brent“, and “Linda Jacobs“, Harrriet was born in North Carolina to slave parents. Her first mistress Margaret Horniblow, taught Jacobs sewing, reading, and spelling. After Margaret's death, her new master became Dr. James Norcom, who sexually harassed Harriet. At the age of 15 she resisted him and became pregnant by Samuel Tredwell Sawyer, an unmarried man from a wealthy family (Alexander and Rucker, 449). After Mrs. Norcom started suspecting about her husband's affair, Harriet went to live with her grandmother, who was emancipated from slavery. Harriet and Sawyer had two children together. However, Dr. Norcom had no intention to leave Harriet in peace. He decided to move her to his brother's estate. Not wanting to endure any more of the abuse, Harriet ran away in 1835. She was then 21 years old. Dr. Norcom searched for her, so Harriet hid in a garret of her grandmother's house for nearly seven years. Only once did she descend from the garret and not even her children were aware of their mother's presence. Unable to

move in a cramped space, having to endure cold winters, summer heats, and rain, not only was Harriet often ill, but cripled as well. The second time Harriet descended, she never went back into the garret. It was with a purpose to flee to New York. Her priority there was to find a job and free her children.

Harriet became a baby nurse in the home of Nathaniel Parker Willis. It was his second wife Cornelia who purchased the freedom of both Harriet and her children in 1852. Harriet's family was thus finally free, including her brother John who had lectured with Frederick Douglass and worked with Harriet as an antislavery activist. Harriet soon became known as an author too, when her narrative *Incidents of a Slave Girl* came out. It was published under the pseudonym "Linda Brent". Not unlike Douglass, Harriet Jacobs rose from the very bottom and became an exceptional writer and intellectual. Their works were most definitely an inspiration to their brothers and sisters, not to mention strong works influencing the entire era.

However, due to her gender, Harriet's work was long either devalued, deemed inauthentic, or believed to be the product of a white author. (Ernest 219) But the suspicions have passed. Jacobs is undoubtedly the only antebellum female author to write a book-length secular autobiography by herself. *Incidents* is also a remarkable report of sexual abuse on Southern plantation.

CONCLUSION

The slave narratives are today recognized as both valuable literary works and strong political weapons. They have a long history, starting in the slavery period, and, in some ways, can be traced in works of prominent black writers to this day. Booker T. Washington's *Up from slavery* was the most famous slave narrative at the beginning of the 20th century. Even Malcolm X's autobiography, as well as some novels, for example by Toni Morrison, have a certain connection to the narratives that were formed during the period of slavery. But, the identity and equality that African americans fought for and the perception of them today, especially in the media, is far from ideal. They still face many hardships like racial hatred and are often perceived as less intelligent or able. Once again, women are usually in worse position than men. In spite of this, black people have come quite far from slavery and enriched the western culture with their music, literature, their unique form of English language, even though it is usually wrongly seen as the sign of lesser intelligence.

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