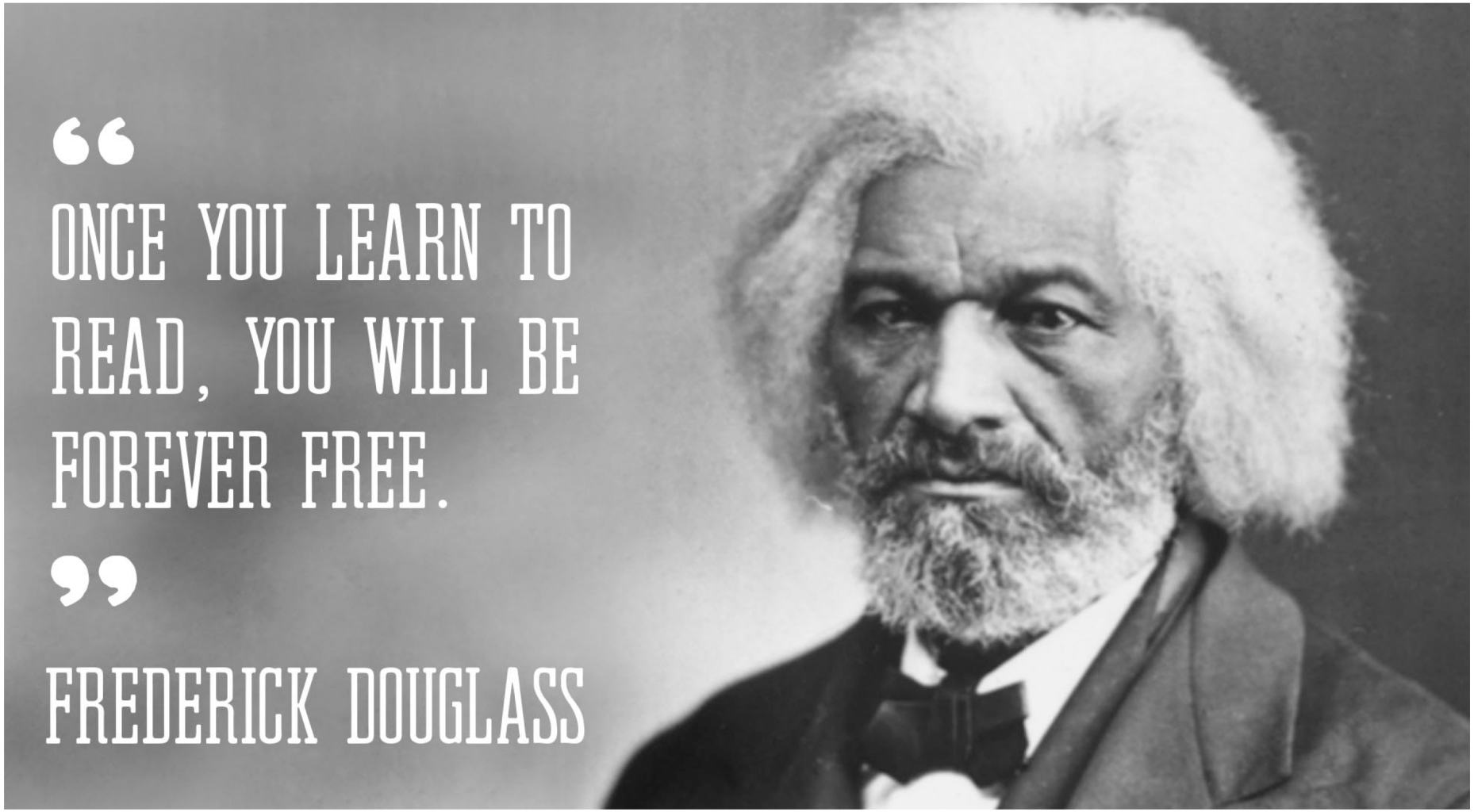
Representing Slave Heroes: F. Douglass




NORTH AMERICA
U.S.
New York
Richmond
Charleston
New Orleans
Mexico City
.5 Million
TO EUROPE
.3 Million
Major Slave Trade Route
WEST INDIES
4.5 Million
CENTRAL AMERICA
.2 Million
Cartagena
Paramaribo
Pacific Ocean
SOUTH AMERICA
.5 Million
Lima
Recife
Salvador
Brazil
5 Million
Rio de Janeiro
Buenos Aires
Valparaíso
Tobacco
Coffee
Cotton
Sugar
Mining
Rice
thomaslegion.net
SLAVE TRADE
FROM AFRICA TO THE AMERICAS
1650–1860
AFRICA
Senegal
Sierra Leone
West Africa Slave Trade Regions
Slave Coast
Congo
Angola
Atlantic Ocean
Between 1650 and 1860, approximately 10 to 15 million enslaved people were transported from western Africa to the Americas. Most were shipped to the West Indies, Central America, and South America.

The slave trade

Estimates of the number of Africans who reached the Americas alive range from 9.5 million to over 20 million. Europeans imported approximately 45 percent of the Africans to Brazil, 40 percent to the Caribbean, 10 to 12 percent to the Spanish mainland colonies, and the remaining 3 to 5 percent to North America. For every African who reached some part of the world alive, an estimated between one to two other Africans died. Thus, allowing for high mortality rates from resisting enslavement in Africa and from the Middle Passage, the slave trade might have had an impact on at least 50 million Africans. The vast regions of West Africa affected directly by slave trade of this magnitude were thrown into the chaos of war, depopulation, and ever-stronger structures of European influence and control that prefigured colonialism.

About two thirds of the African slaves imported into the Americas came from the west coast (Senegal, Gambia, etc.). The middle passage – the crossing of the Atlantic – was a terrible experience which only the very healthy and strong survived.

To profit as much as possible from each vessel's journey, slavetraders reduced the space allowed to each slave to a minimum barely necessary for survival. Blacks were stocked like goods, they were obliged to lay in chains in the ship's hull, often in two or three layers, and could not move. They often rebelled and sometimes killed the crew, but they rarely managed to return to their homeland. When the slave trade became illegal, conditions became even worse, as the middle passage became dangerous and costly. Ships had a simple device to get rid of their human cargo in case they met patrols, they just threw the slaves into the ocean as it was easier to replace slaves than to face trials. In 1808 the US outlawed the transatlantic slave trade, but domestic slave trade was legal and the importation of blacks from Africa continued illegaly for several decades.

The Middle Passage

The Middle Passage was the crossing from Africa to the Americas, which the ships made carrying their ‘cargo’ of slaves. It was so-called because it was the middle section of the trade route taken by many of the ships. The Middle Passage took the enslaved Africans away from their homeland. They were from different countries and different ethnic (or cultural) groups. They spoke different languages. Many had never seen the sea before, let alone been on a ship. They had no knowledge of where they were going or what awaited them there. The voyage usually took six to eight weeks, but bad weather could increase this to 13 weeks or more.

Race, Freedom and the Declaration of Independence

Race is closely connected in American history with freedom, but while freedom has become, since the very beginning of the country's history, a symbol, a staple of Americanness, a goal, a catchword for national identity, race and its corollary facts, slavery and segregation, have remained invisible in the collective imaginary and in the national memory.

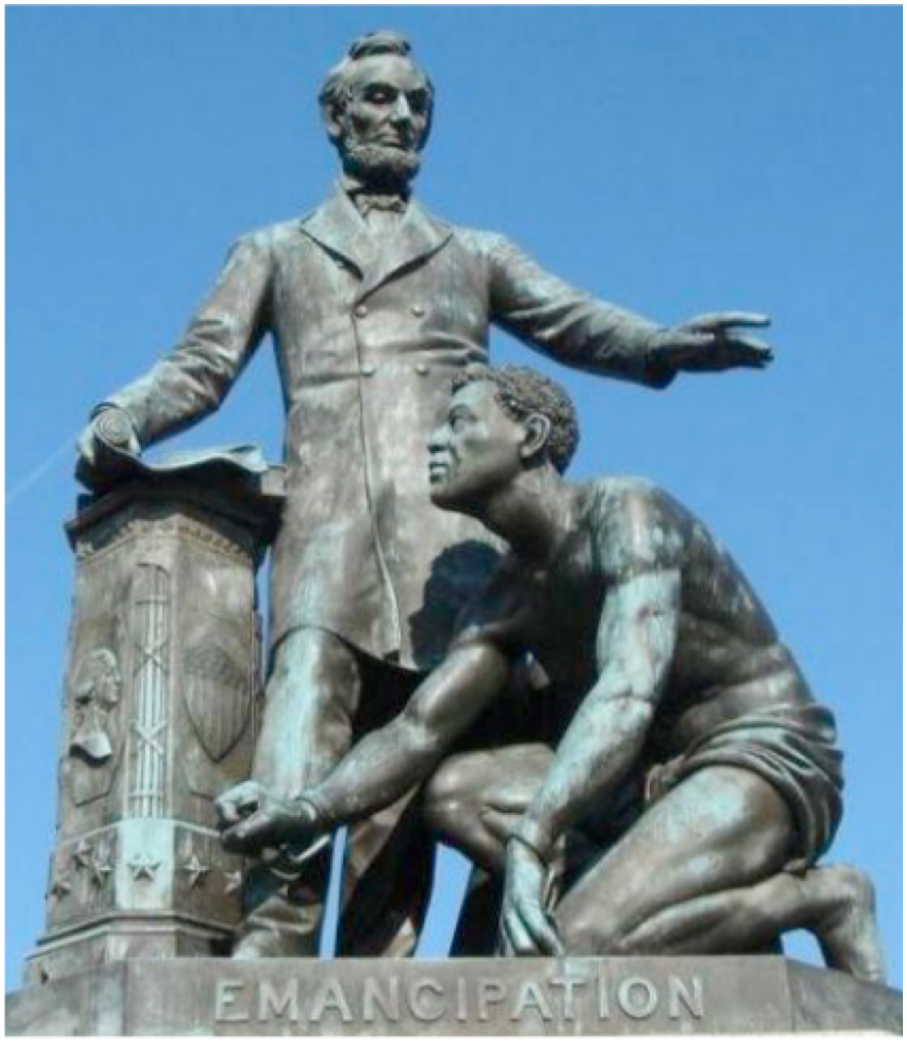
The first draft of the Declaration of Independence, 1776, included a passage condemning King George III and the British for the enslavement of Africans. It was removed in the final version because of objections coming from the representatives of South Carolina and Georgia: many of the Founding Fathers of the American Republic were slaveholders and did not wish to do away with slavery.

The Constitution

Slavery was silently legitimized by the US Constitution (1787), which was a “miracle of compromise” on the issue, in spite of the fact that some of the Founding Fathers regarded it as something to get rid of as soon as possible (Jefferson, Washington, Franklin, were all or had been slaveholders). Discussion had raged in the Constitutional Convention, with Northerners unwilling to count slaves in the population (slavery was present in all the 13 founding states – Delaware, Pennsylvania, New Jersey, Georgia, Connecticut, Massachusetts, Maryland, South Carolina, New Hampshire, Virginia, New York, North Carolina, and Rhode Island – but the ratio was very different, in some southern states slaves were present in high numbers) and Southerners, of course, well aware of the high proportion of slaves to the total population in their states, wanted them counted as whole persons despite their legal status as chattel. An agreement was finally reached: slaves, called “other persons,” would be counted as three-fifths of a whole person.

The Difficulty of Celebrating Freedom Fighters in US Public Memory

The image of the passive slave patiently awaiting the gift of emancipation is still the favored depiction of the achievement of freedom on the part of enslaved African Americans. There is a radical black oral tradition, however, that celebrates the memory of rebels who fought back and strived for freedom; however, it is almost invisible in mainstream popular culture. One such hero is Nat Turner, a "troublesome property," to quote the title of the PBS documentary directed by Charles Burnett (2003), whose heroism "is still subject to historical, political, and cultural censure," as Celeste-Marie Bernier wrote in her brilliant study of black heroism in the transatlantic imagination (2012, 92). Whites' and blacks' respective archives remember him in opposite ways, as a fanatic who killed innocent people or as a leader whose rebellion ignited the process of emancipation.



Thomas Ball, *Freedom's Memorial* (1876), Lincoln Park, Washington, DC

The first decolonial fight for freedom: the Haitian Revolution

Led initially by the free people of colour of Saint-Domingue, whose aim was equality with the colony's white inhabitants, this spread from August 1791 to a wider revolt among the enslaved black population.
A key figure in the events that would become the Haitian Revolution was Toussaint Louverture, a formerly enslaved man who would rise to the rank of Governor-General of the colony.
Louverture led his armies against the British, French and Spanish, and eventually sided with France to abolish slavery – including in the neighbouring Spanish colony of Santo Domingo (now the Dominican Republic), which he occupied to unite the island of Hispaniola.
Charles Forsdick , "Visualising Toussaint Louverture", https://blog.britishmuseum.org/visualising-toussaint-louverture/

Nicolas Maurin (1799–1850), Toussaint Louverture. Lithograph, 1833.

Anthony Bogues on the «dual revolution»
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=kif6WGfCWs4

Nat Turner led the only effective slave rebellion (August 1831) in U.S. history.

He was born the property of a plantation owner in Virginia. His mother was an African native. He learned to read and eagerly absorbed intensive religious training: He saw himself called upon by God to lead his people out of bondage. He began to exert a powerful influence on many of the nearby slaves, who called him “the Prophet.”

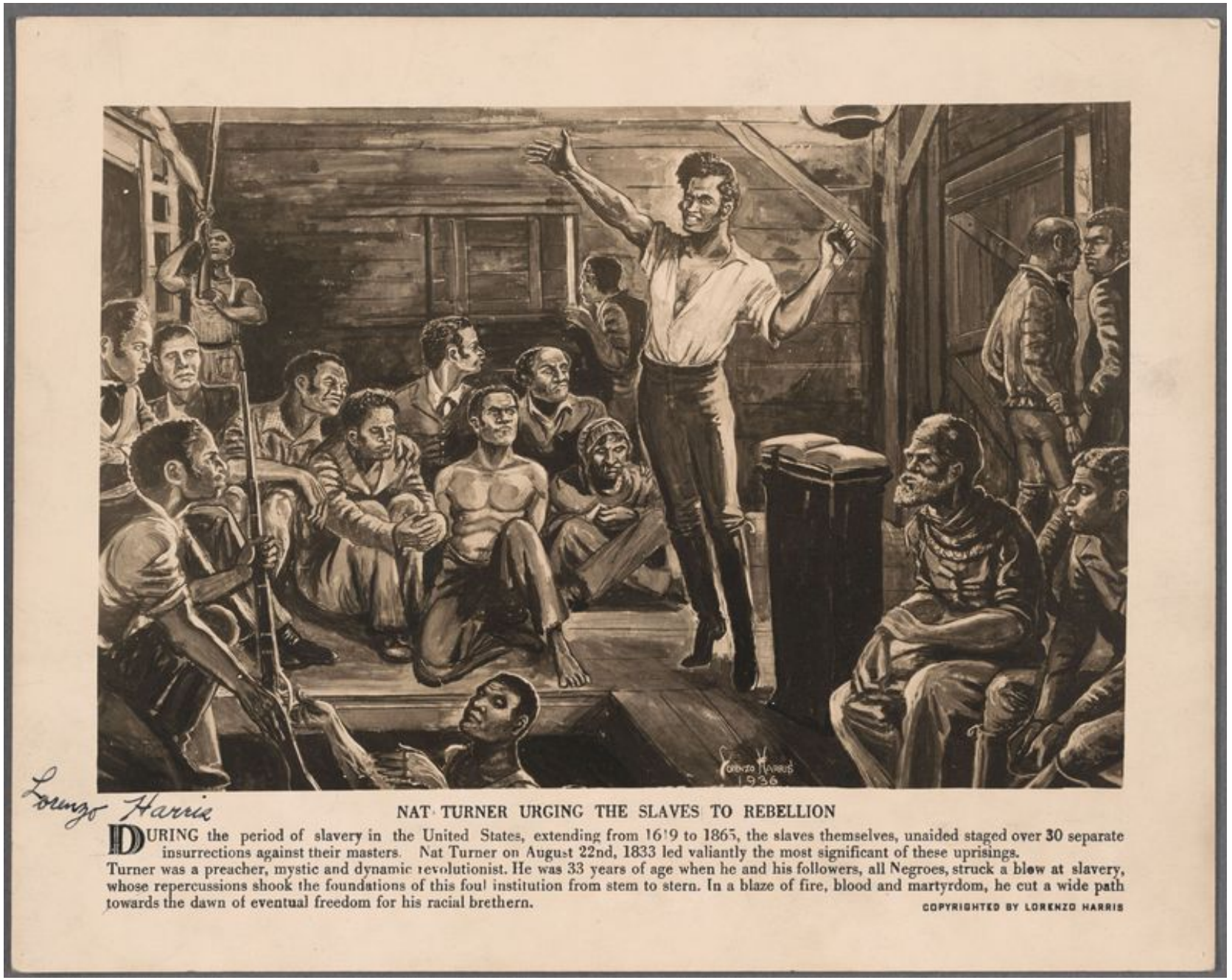
In 1831 a sign in the form of an eclipse of the sun caused Turner to believe that the hour to strike was near. In two days and nights about 60 white people were killed.

Nat Turner’s rebellion put an end to the white Southern myth that slaves were either contented with their lot or too submissive to mount an armed revolt. For many years in black churches throughout the country, the name Jerusalem referred not only to the Bible but also covertly to the place where the rebel slave had met his death.

Turner has been popularized by William Styron in his novel *The Confessions of Nat Turner* (1967), a controversial book that was harshly criticized by black intellectuals.

HORRID MASSACRE IN VIRGINIA.

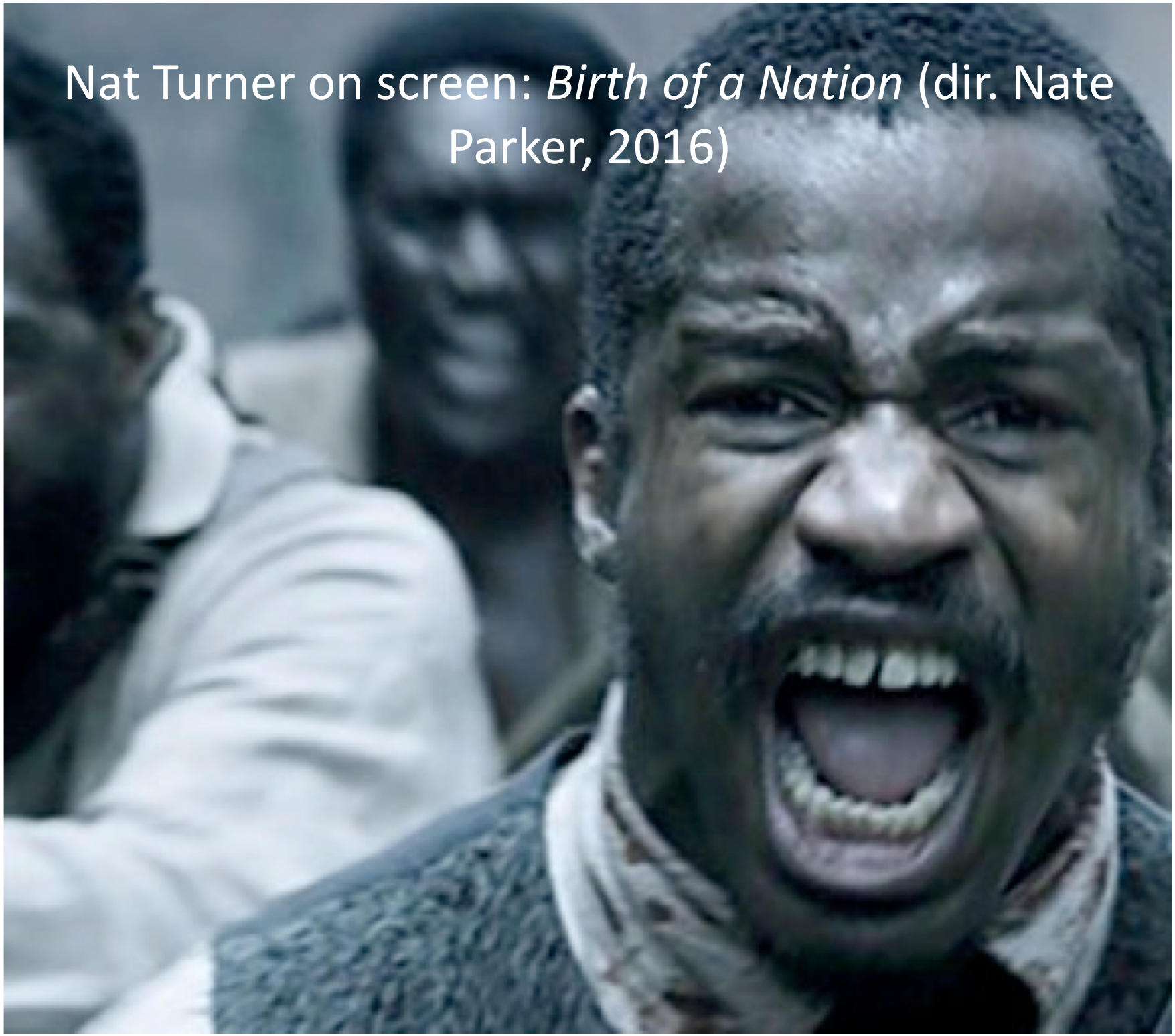
The Scenes which the above Plate is designed to represent, are—Fig 1. a Mther intreating for the lives of her children.—2. Mr Travis, cruelly murdered by his own Slaves.—3. Mr. Barrow, who bravely defended himself until his wife escaped.—4. A comp. of mounted Dragoons in pursuit of the Blacks.



Lorenzo Harris, Nat Turner Urging the Slaves to Rebellion, 1936

Harris was an illustrator for the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People's (NAACP) publication *The Crisis* during the early part of the twentieth-century

From the trailer of *Nat Turner Unchained*, an independent film project from Tupac Shakur's lookalike, Josh Harraway. http://www.natturnermovie.com/. Link is dead, but you get redirected to a Nat Turner podcast https://natturner.libsyn.com


Nat Turner on screen: *Birth of a Nation* (dir. Nate Parker, 2016)

Harriet Tubman

In 2016 the Obama administration announced that Harriet Tubman would replace Jackson on the front of the $20 bill, becoming the first woman in more than a century and first African American to grace the front of a paper note. Jackson would be featured on the back of the bill alongside an image of the White House.

The Trump administration delayed the plan.

Summary: S.568 — 118th Congress (2023-2024)

All Information (Except Text)

Listen

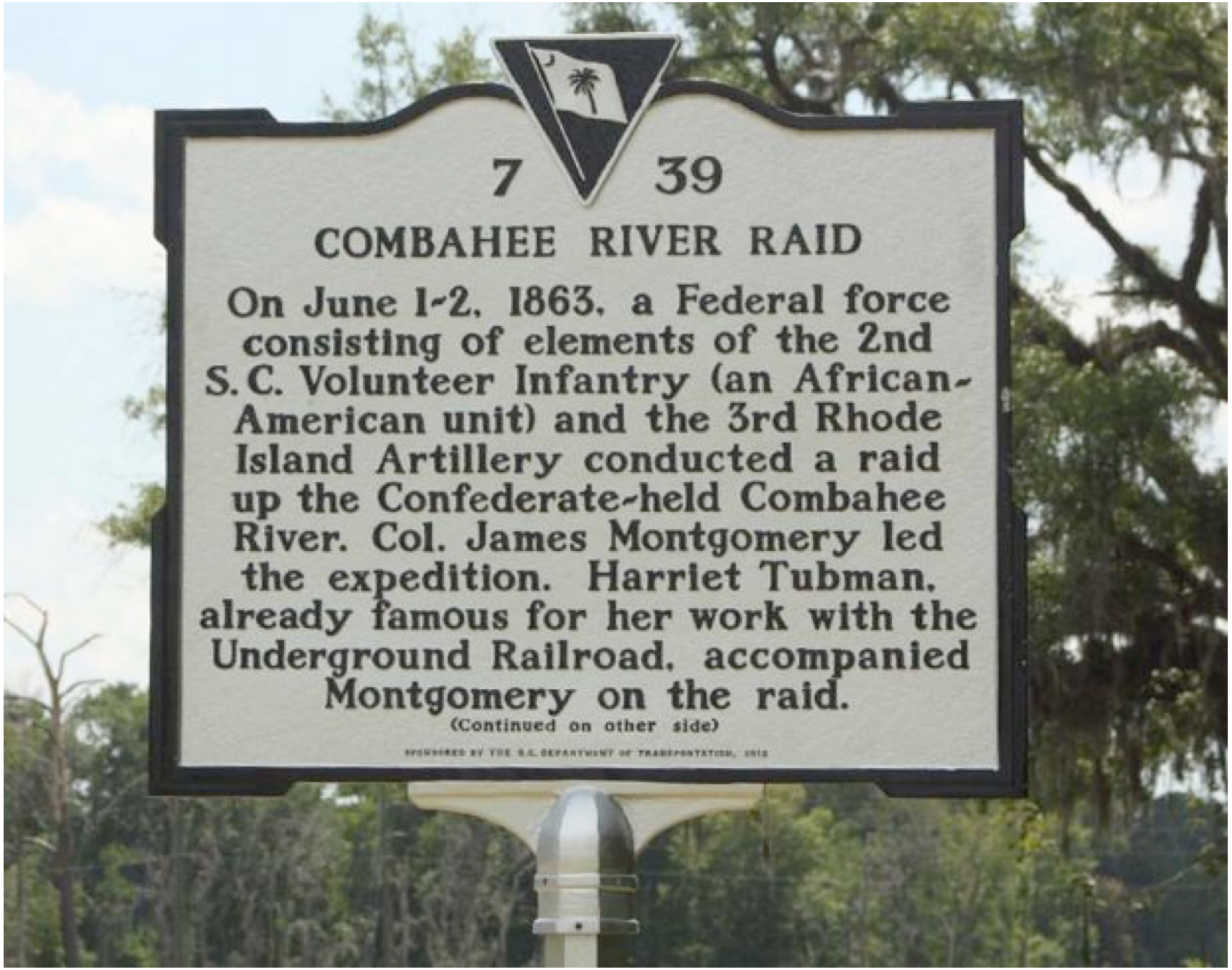
There is one summary for S.568. Bill summaries are authored by CRS.

Shown Here:
Introduced in Senate (02/28/2023)

Harriet Tubman Tribute Act of 2023

This bill directs the Department of the Treasury to ensure that the face of all $20 federal reserve notes printed after December 31, 2030, bear the likeness of Harriet Tubman. Treasury may delay this date by two years if the earlier deadline creates an unacceptable risk (1) of counterfeiting; or (2) to the safe, secure, and speedy functioning of the United States economy.

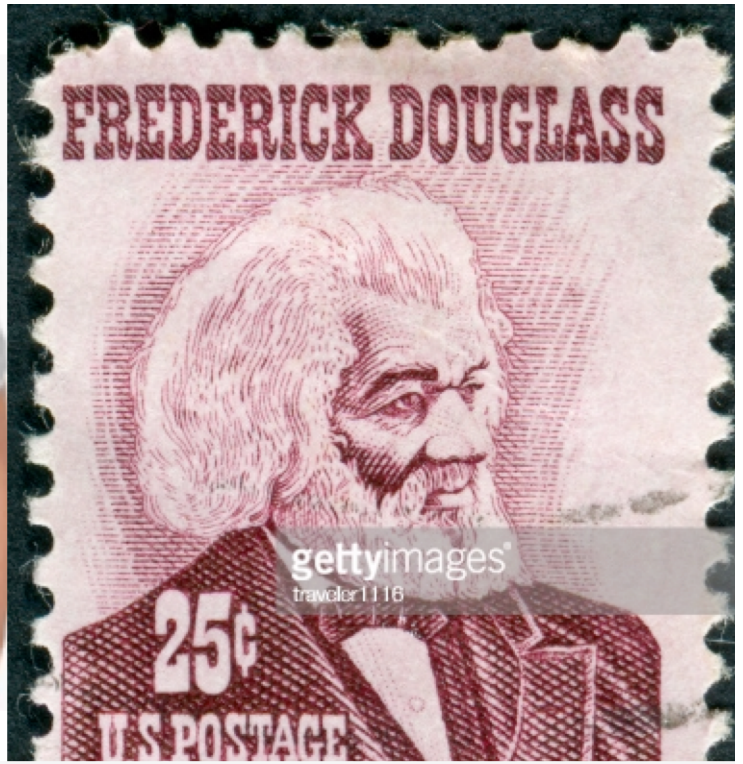
Fern Cunningham, Harriet Tubman Memorial, Boston (1999)

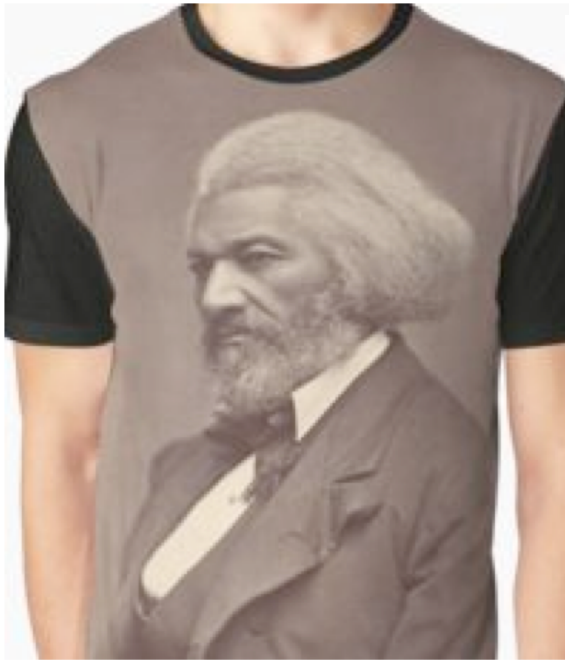

7 39
COMBAHEE RIVER RAID
On June 1-2, 1863, a Federal force consisting of elements of the 2nd S.C. Volunteer Infantry (an African-American unit) and the 3rd Rhode Island Artillery conducted a raid up the Confederate-held Combahee River. Col. James Montgomery led the expedition. Harriet Tubman, already famous for her work with the Underground Railroad, accompanied Montgomery on the raid.
(Continued on other side)

That Awkward Moment

When Leftist Feminists Find Out That Harriet Tubman - Who They Voted To Kick Andrew Jackson - The Founder Of The Democratic Party - Off The $20 Bill - Was A Gun Toting - Democrat Shooting - 2nd Amendment Supporting Republican!


AGITATE
AGITATE
AGITATE!
-Frederick Douglas


FREDERICK DOUGLASS
gettyimages
traveler1116
25¢
U.S POSTAGE

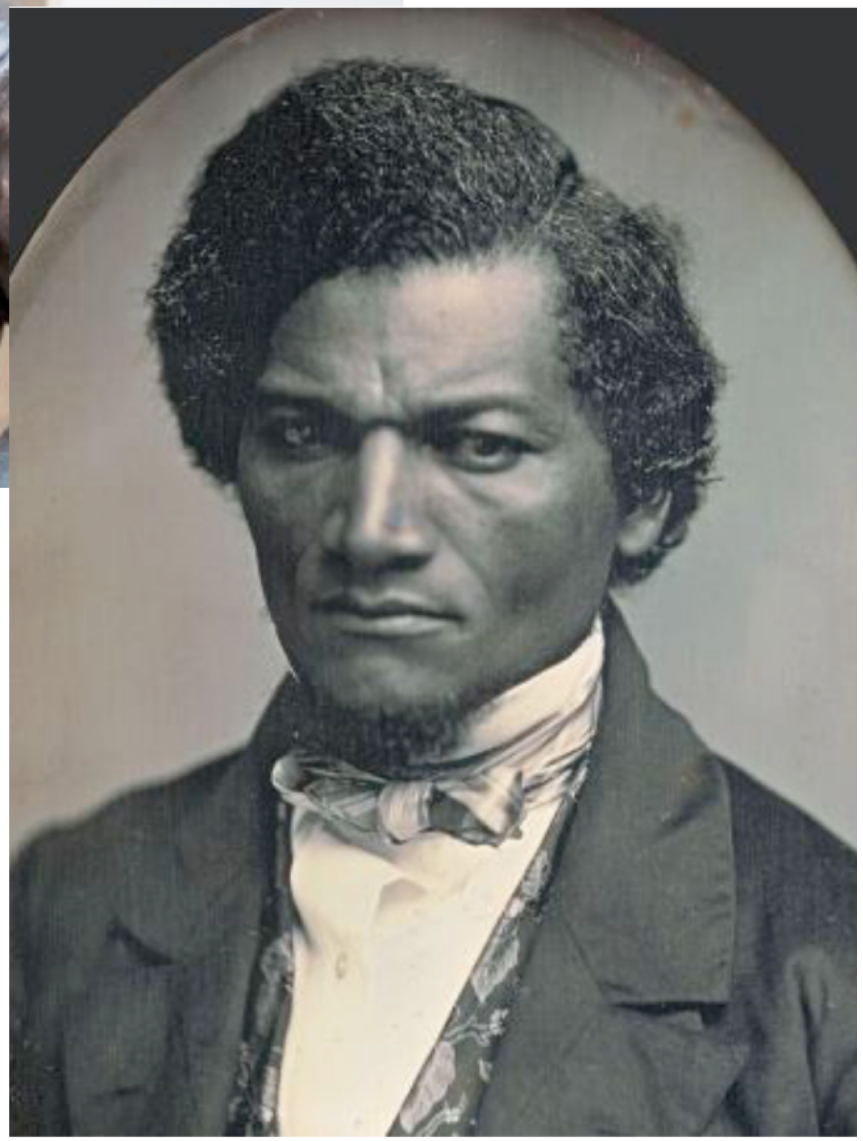



"IT IS EASIER TO BUILD STRONG CHILDREN THAN TO REPAIR BROKEN MEN."
Frederick Douglass


"I would unite with anybody to do right and with nobody to do wrong."
- Frederick Douglass

“Frederick Douglass is an example of somebody who's done an amazing job and is being recognized more and more, I notice.”
Donald Trump

Steven Weitzman, Frederick Douglass (2013), Emancipation Hall, Washington, DC



Samuel Miller, Frederick Douglass (circa 1850)

THE SLAVE NARRATIVE – a black message in a white envelope (John Sekora)

the first appears in 1760; over 100 are published
before the Civil War
purpose: persuade American people that slavery went
against the moral and spiritual values of America
means: exposing the horrors of slavery and showing the humanity of blacks; providing an opposition to the pro-slavery arguments and idyllic pictures Northerners were exposed to
1789: Olaudah Equiano's narrative becomes the
first slave narrative to be an international best seller
1930s: Over 2,500 oral histories collected by the Writers' Project

Slave narratives demonstrated African Americans' mastery of language and the ability to write their own history.

Characteristics of the Slave Narrative, from James Olney's "'I was born': Slave Narratives, Their Status as Autobiography and as Literature" (1984)

The conventions for slave narratives were so early and so firmly established that one can imagine a sort of master outline drawn from the great narratives and guiding the lesser ones. Such an outline would look something like this:

A. An engraved portrait, signed by the narrator.

B. A title page that includes the claim, as an integral part of the title, "Written by Himself" (or some close variant: "Written from a statement of Facts Made by Himself"; or "Written by a Friend, as Related to Him by Brother Jones"; etc.).

C. A handful of testimonials and/or one or more prefaces or introductions written either by a white abolitionist friend of the narrator (William Lloyd Garrison, Wendell Phillips) or by a white amanuensis/editor/author actually responsible for the text (John Greenleaf Whittier, David Wilson, Louis Alexis Chamerovzow), in the course of which preface the reader is told that the narrative is a "plain,unvarnished tale" and that naught "has been set down in malice, nothing exaggerated, nothing drawn from the imagination"--indeed, the tale, it is claimed, understates the horrors of slavery.

D. A poetic epigraph, by preference from William Cowper.

E. The actual narrative:

-a first sentence beginning, "I was born . . . ," then specifying a place but not a date of birth;

- a sketchy account of parentage, often involving a white father;

-description of a cruel master, mistress, or overseer, details of first observed whipping and numerous subsequent whippings, with women very frequently the victims;

- an account of one extraordinarily strong, hardworking slave--often "pure African"--who, because there is no reason for it, refuses to be whipped;

- record of the barriers raised against slave literacy and the overwhelming difficulties encountered in learning to read and write;

-description of a "Christian" slaveholder (often of one such dying in terror) and the accompanying claim that "Christian" slaveholders are invariably worse than those professing no religion;

-description of the amounts and kinds of food and clothing given to slaves, the work required of them, the pattern of a day, a week, a year;

- account of a slave auction, of families being separated and destroyed, of distraught mothers clinging to their children as they are torn from them, of slave coffles being driven South;

-descriptions of patrols, of failed attempt(s) to escape, of pursuit by men and dogs;

-description of successful attempt(s) to escape, lying by during the day, travelling by night guided by the North Star, reception in a free state by Quakers who offer a lavish breakfast and much genial thee/thou conversation

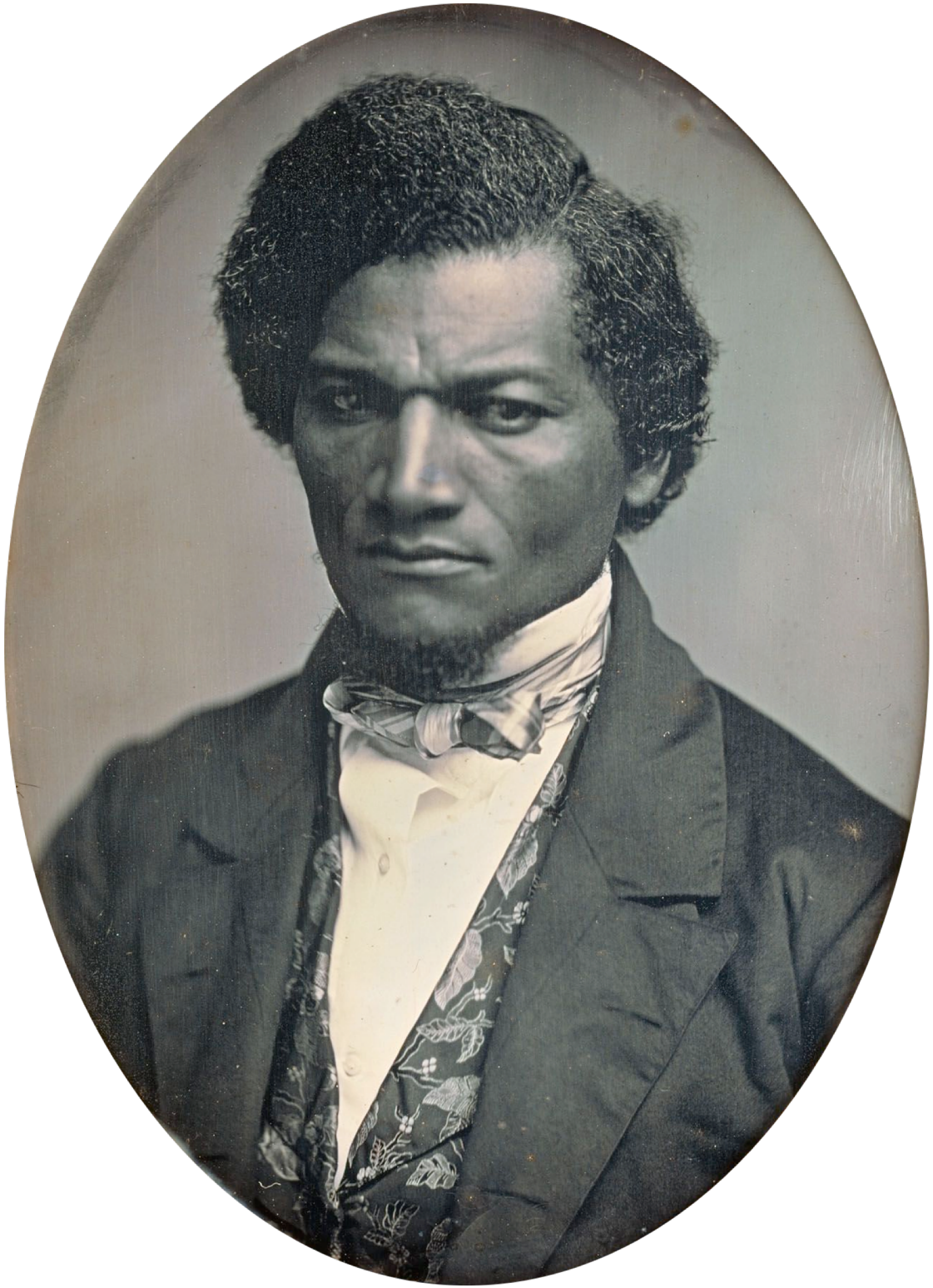
-taking of a new last name (frequently one suggested by a white abolitionist) to accord with new social identity as a free man, but retention of first name as a mark of continuity of individual identity;

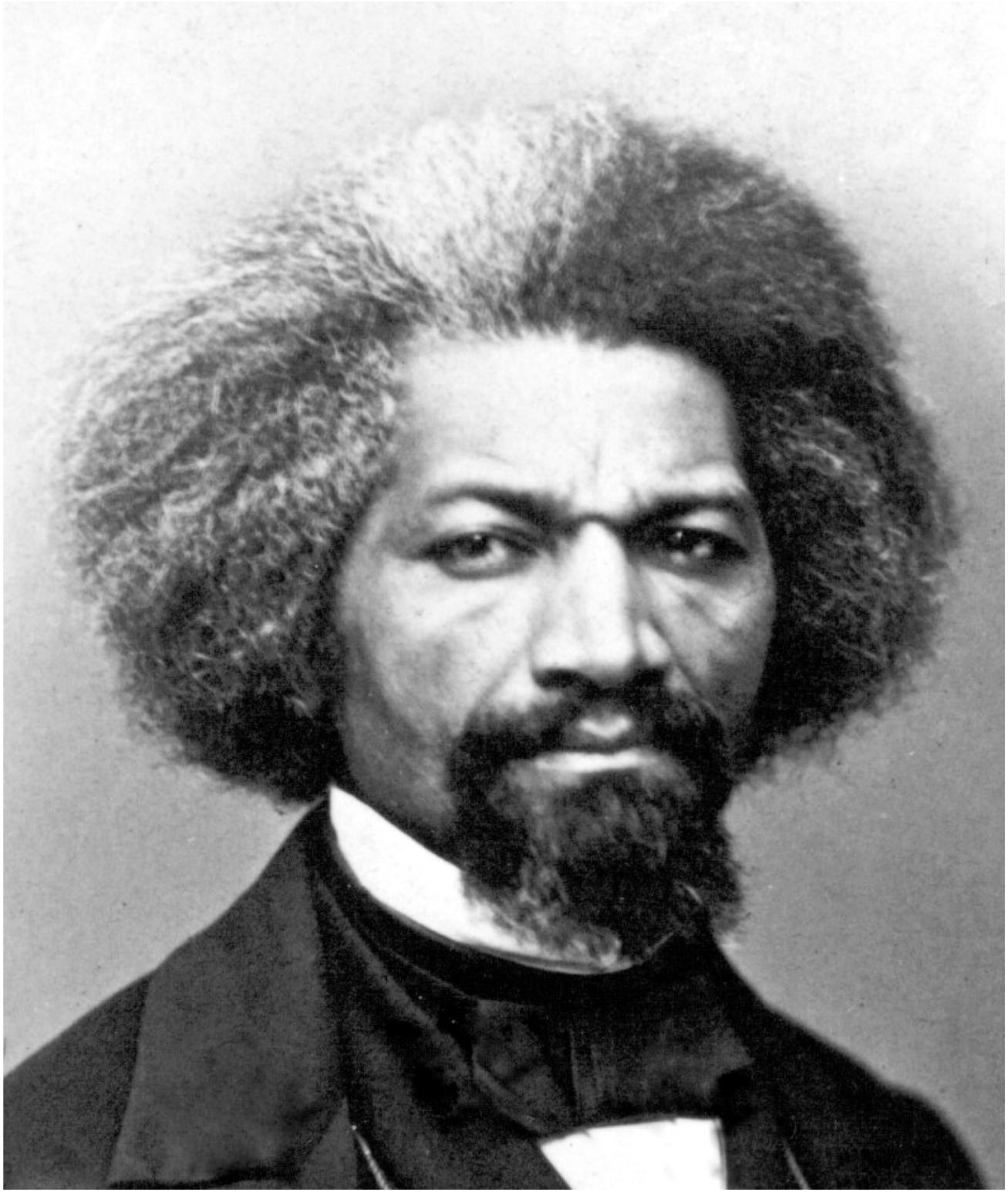
- reflections on slavery.

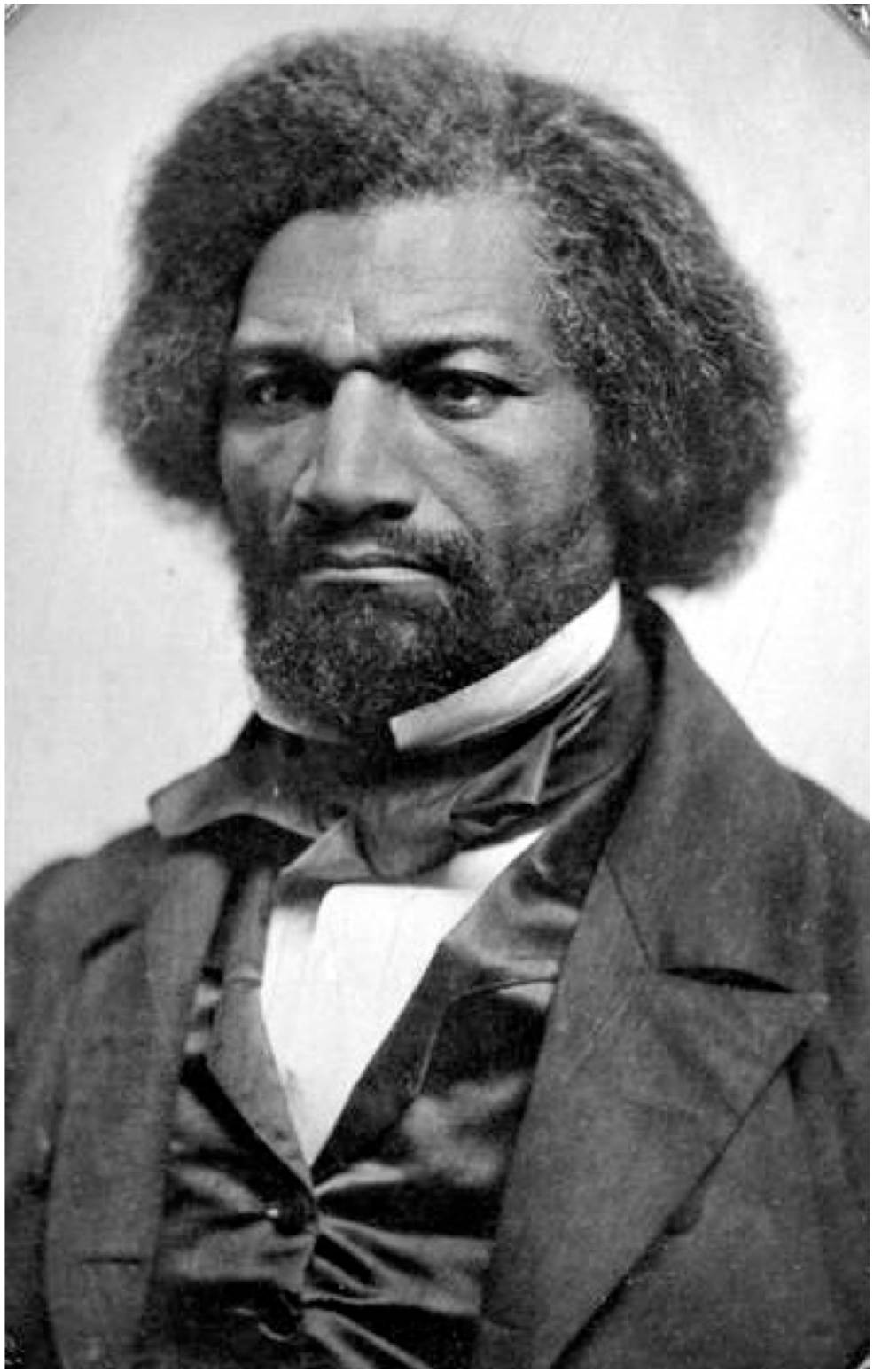
F. An appendix or appendices composed of documentary material--bills of sale, details of purchase from slavery, newspaper items--,further reflections on slavery, sermons, anti-slavery speeches, poems, appeals to the reader for funds and moral support in the battle against slavery.

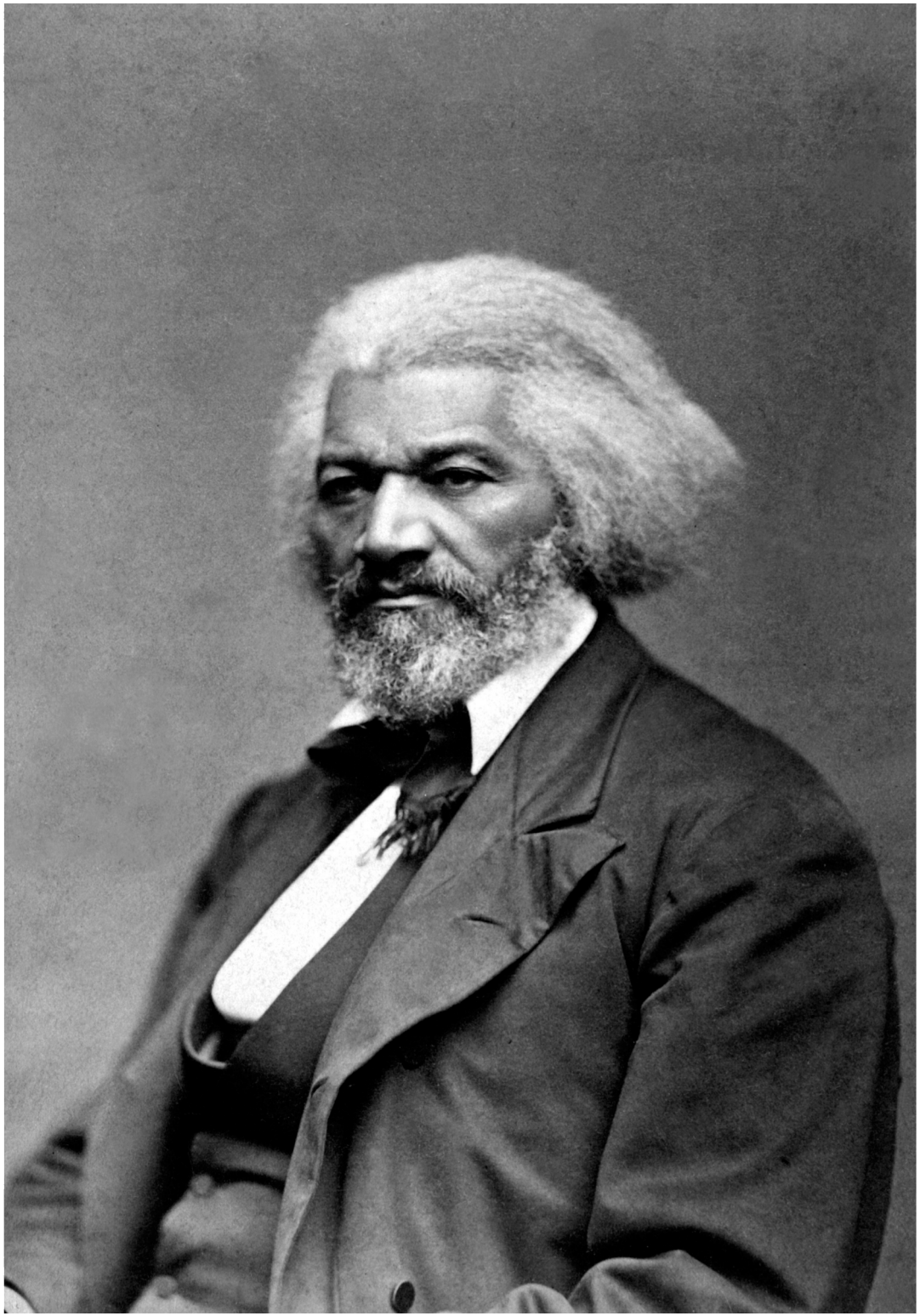
The Slave Narratives: A Genre and a Source
by David W. Blight

The autobiographies of ex-slaves in America are the foundation of an African American literary tradition, as well as unique glimpses into the souls of slaves themselves. The roughly sixty-five to seventy slave narratives published in America or England between 1760 and 1860 were windows into the nature of slavery itself; they were first-person witnesses to the will to be known and the will to write among a people so often set apart and defined out of the human family of letters. **American slaves wrote their personal stories first because they were under such pressure to demonstrate their own humanity in a sea of racial prejudice**. They also wrote **to prove that they could be reliable truth-tellers of their own experience. And they wrote I-narratives in order to declare their own literary, psychological, and spiritual independence**. The stories that slaves wrote were not only about how they became free, but were also precious acts, as the critic William Andrews has put it, of "free-storytelling." For former slaves, some of whom were still legally fugitives when they wrote, **the pen became an instrument of liberation** when neither law nor society offered the same.









“What to the Slave Is the 4° of July?” (Rochester 1852)

The fact is, ladies and gentlemen, the distance between this platform and the slave plantation, from which I escaped, is considerable — and the difficulties to be overcome in getting from the latter to the former, are by no means slight. That I am here to-day is, to me, a matter of astonishment as well as of gratitude. You will not, therefore, be surprised, if in what I have to say I evince no elaborate preparation, nor grace my speech with any high sounding exordium. **With little experience and with less learning, I have been able to throw my thoughts hastily and imperfectly together; and trusting to your patient and generous indulgence, I will proceed to lay them before you.**

This, for the purpose of this celebration, is the 4th of July. It is the birthday of **your** National Independence, and of **your** political freedom. This, to you, is what the Passover was to the emancipated people of God. It carries your minds back to the day, and to the act of your great deliverance; and to the signs, and to the wonders, associated with that act, and that day. This celebration also marks the beginning of another year of your national life; and reminds you that the Republic of America is now 76 years old. I am glad, fellow-citizens, that your nation is so young. Seventy-six years, though a good old age for a man, is but a mere speck in the life of a nation. Three score years and ten is the allotted time for individual men; but nations number their years by thousands. **According to this fact, you are, even now, only in the beginning of your national career, still lingering in the period of childhood. I repeat, I am glad this is so. There is hope in the thought, and hope is much needed, under the dark clouds which lower above the horizon.** The eye of the reformer is met with angry flashes, portending disastrous times; but his heart may well beat lighter at the thought that America is young, and that she is still in the impressible stage of her existence. **May he not hope that high lessons of wisdom, of justice and of truth, will yet give direction to her destiny?**

Fellow-citizens, pardon me, allow me to ask, **why am I called upon to speak here to-day? What have I, or those I represent, to do with your national independence?** Are the great principles of political freedom and of natural justice, embodied in that Declaration of Independence, extended to us? and am I, therefore, called upon to bring our humble offering to the national altar, and to confess the benefits and express devout gratitude for the blessings resulting from your independence to us?

Would to God, both for your sakes and ours, that an affirmative answer could be truthfully returned to these questions! Then would my task be light, and my burden easy and delightful. For who is there so cold, that a nation's sympathy could not warm him? Who so obdurate and dead to the claims of gratitude, that would not thankfully acknowledge such priceless benefits? Who so stolid and selfish, that would not give his voice to swell the hallelujahs of a nation's jubilee, when the chains of servitude had been torn from his limbs? I am not that man. In a case like that, the dumb might eloquently speak, and the "lame man leap as an hart."

But, such is not the state of the case. I say it with a sad sense of the disparity between us. I am not included within the pale of this glorious anniversary! Your high independence only reveals the immeasurable distance between us. The blessings in which you, this day, rejoice, are not enjoyed in common. — **The rich inheritance of justice, liberty, prosperity and independence, bequeathed by your fathers, is shared by you, not by me. The sunlight that brought life and healing to you, has brought stripes and death to me. This Fourth [of] July is yours, not mine. You may rejoice, I must mourn. To drag a man in fetters into the grand illuminated temple of liberty, and call upon him to join you in joyous anthems, were inhuman mockery and sacrilegious irony. Do you mean, citizens, to mock me, by asking me to speak to-day?** If so, there is a parallel to your conduct. And let me warn you that it is dangerous to copy the example of a nation whose crimes, lowering up to heaven, were thrown down by the breath of the Almighty, burying that nation in irrecoverable ruin! I can to-day take up the plaintive lament of a peeled and woe-smitten people!...

Standing, there, identified with the American bondman, making his wrongs mine, I do not hesitate to declare, with all my soul, that the character and conduct of this nation never looked blacker to me than on this 4th of July! Whether we turn to the declarations of the past, or to the professions of the present, the conduct of the nation seems equally hideous and revolting. **America is false to the past, false to the present, and solemnly binds herself to be false to the future.**

NARRATIVE

OF THE

LIFE

OF

FREDERICK DOUGLASS,

AN

AMERICAN SLAVE.

WRITTEN BY HIMSELF.

BOSTON:

PUBLISHED AT THE ANTI-SLAVERY OFFICE,

No. 25 Cornhill

1845.

Narrative of the life of Frederick Douglass, an American slave, written by himself

- **Frontispiece**
- **Boston: Published at the Anti-Slavery Office, 1845**

From the Delaware Republican: A. C. C. Thompson, "TO THE PUBLIC. FALSEHOOD REFUTED"

And although I am aware that no sensible, unprejudiced person will credit such a ridiculous publication, which bears the glaring impress of falsehood on every page, yet I deem it expedient that I should give the public some information respecting the validity of this narrative, because I was for many years a citizen of the section of country where the scenes of the above mentioned narrative are laid; and am intimately acquainted with most of the gentlemen whose characters are so shamefully traduced, and I am also aware, that the Narrative was not written by the professed author; but from statements of this runaway slave, some evil designed person or persons have composed this catalogue of lies to excite the indignation of the public opinion against the slaveholders of the South; and have even attempted to plunge their venomous fangs in the vitals of the church.

I shall, therefore, briefly notice some of the most glaring falsehoods contained in the aforesaid Narrative, and give a true representation of the character of those gentlemen, who have been censured in such an uncharitable manner, as murderers, hypocrites, and everything else that is vile…

1st. The identity of the author. About eight years ago I knew this recreant slave by the name of Frederick Bailey, (instead of Douglass.) **He then lived with Mr. Edward Covy, and was an unlearned, and rather an ordinary negro, and am confident he was not capable of writing the Narrative alluded to; for none but an educated man, and one who had some knowledge of the rules of grammar, could write so correctly. Although, to make the imposition at all creditable, the composer has labored to write it in as plain a style as possible**: consequently, the detection of this first falsehood proves the whole production to be notoriously untrue.

From W. L. Garrison's Preface

I shall never forget his first speech at the convention--the extraordinary emotion it excited in my own mind--the powerful impression it created upon a crowded auditory, completely taken by surprise--the applause which followed from the beginning to the end of his felicitous remarks**. I think I never hated slavery so intensely as at that moment; certainly, my perception of the enormous outrage which is inflicted by it, on the godlike nature of its victims, was rendered far more clear than ever.** There stood one, in physical proportion and stature commanding and exact--in intellect richly endowed--in natural eloquence a prodigy--in soul manifestly "created but a little lower than the angels"--yet a slave, ay, a fugitive slave,--trembling for his safety, hardly daring to believe that on the American soil, a single white person could be found who would befriend him at all hazards, for the love of God and humanity! **Capable of high attainments as an intellectual and moral being--needing nothing but a comparatively small amount of cultivation to make him an ornament to society and a blessing to his race--by the law of the land, by the voice of the people, by the terms of the slave code, he was only a piece of property, a beast of burden, a chattel personal, nevertheless!**

As soon as he had taken his seat, filled with hope and admiration, I rose, and **declared that PATRICK HENRY, of revolutionary fame, never made a speech more eloquent in the cause of liberty, than the one we had just listened to from the lips of that hunted fugitive**. So I believed at that time,--such is my belief now. I reminded the audience of the peril which surrounded this self-emancipated young man at the North, --even in Massachusetts, on the soil of the Pilgrim Fathers, among the descendants of revolutionary sires; and I appealed to them, whether they would ever allow him to be carried back into slavery,--law or no law, constitution or no constitution. The response was unanimous and in thunder-tones--"NO!" "Will you succor and protect him as a brother-man--a resident of the old Bay State?" "YES!" shouted the whole mass, with an energy so startling, that the ruthless tyrants south of Mason and Dixon's line might almost have heard the mighty burst of feeling, and recognized it **as the pledge of an invincible determination, on the part of those who gave it, never to betray him that wanders, but to hide the outcast, and firmly to abide the consequences.**

Mr. DOUGLASS has very properly chosen to write his own Narrative, in his own style, and according to the best of his ability, rather than to employ some one else. It is, therefore**, entirely his own production; and, considering how long and dark was the career he had to run as a slave,--how few have been his opportunities to improve his mind since he broke his iron fetters--it is, in my judgment, highly creditable to his head and heart.** He who can peruse it without a tearful eye, a heaving breast, an afflicted spirit,--without being filled with an unutterable abhorrence of slavery and all its abettors, and animated with a determination to seek the immediate overthrow of that execrable system,--without trembling for the fate of this country in the hands of a righteous God, who is ever on the side of the oppressed, and whose arm is not shortened that it cannot save,--must have a flinty heart, and be qualified to act the part of a trafficker "in slaves and the souls of men**." I am confident that it is essentially true in all its statements; that nothing has been set down in malice, nothing exaggerated, nothing drawn from the imagination; that it comes short of the reality, rather than overstates a single fact in regard to SLAVERY AS IT IS.** The experience of FREDERICK DOUGLASS, as a slave, was not a peculiar one; his lot was not especially a hard one; his case may be regarded as a very fair specimen of the treatment of slaves in Maryland, in which State it is conceded that they are better fed and less cruelly treated than in Georgia, Alabama, or Louisiana. Many have suffered incomparably more, while very few on the plantations have suffered less, than himself.

LETTER
FROM WENDELL PHILLIPS, ESQ.

BOSTON, April 22, 1845.

My Dear Friend:

You remember the old fable of "The Man and the Lion," where the lion complained that he should not be so misrepresented "when the lions write history."

I am glad the time has come when the "lions write history." We have been left long enough to gather character of slavery from the involuntary evidence of the masters. …

Again, we have known you long, and can put the most entire confidence in your truth, candor, and sincerity. **Every one who has heard you speak has felt, and, I am confident, every one who reads your book will feel, persuaded that you give them a fair specimen of the whole truth.** No one-sided portrait,--no wholesale complaints,--but strict justice done, whenever individual kindliness has neutralized, for a moment, the deadly system with which it was strangely allied. You have been with us, too, some years, and can fairly compare the twilight of rights, which your race enjoy at the North, with that "noon of night" under which they labor south of Mason and Dixon's line. Tell us whether, after all, the half-free colored man of Massachusetts is worse off than the pampered slave of the rice swamps!

Chapter One

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. **By far the larger part of the slaves know as little of their ages as horses know of theirs, and it is the wish of most masters within my knowledge to keep their slaves thus ignorant**. I do not remember to have ever met a slave who could tell of his birthday. They seldom come nearer to it than planting-time, harvest-time, cherry-time, spring-time, or fall-time. **A want of information concerning my own was a source of unhappiness to me even during childhood. The white children could tell their ages. I could not tell why I ought to be deprived of the same privilege. I was not allowed to make any inquiries of my master concerning it. He deemed all such inquiries on the part of a slave improper and impertinent, and evidence of a restless spirit.** 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.

My mother was named Harriet Bailey. She was the daughter of Isaac and Betsey Bailey, both colored, and quite dark. My mother was of a darker complexion than either my grandmother or grandfather.

My father was a white man. He was admitted to be such by all I ever heard speak of my parentage. The opinion was also whispered that my master was my father; but of the correctness of this opinion, I know nothing; **the means of knowing was withheld from me**.

My mother and I were separated when I was but an infant--before I knew her as my mother. It is a common custom, in the part of Maryland from which I ran away, to part children from their mothers at a very early age. Frequently, before the child has reached its twelfth month, its mother is taken from it, and hired out on some farm a considerable distance off, and the child is placed under the care of an old woman, too old for field labor. **For what this separation is done, I do not know, unless it be to hinder the development of the child's affection toward its mother, and to blunt and destroy the natural affection of the mother for the child. This is the inevitable result.**

I never saw my mother, to know her as such, more than four or five times in my life; and each of these times was very short in duration, and at night. She was hired by a Mr. Stewart, who lived about twelve miles from my home. She made her journeys to see me in the night, travelling the whole distance on foot, after the performance of her day's work. She was a field hand, and a whipping is the penalty of not being in the field at sunrise, unless a slave has special permission from his or her master to the contrary--a permission which they seldom get, and one that gives to him that gives it the proud name of being a kind master. I do not recollect of ever seeing my mother by the light of day. She was with me in the night. She would lie down with me, and get me to sleep, but long before I waked she was gone. Very little communication ever took place between us. Death soon ended what little we could have while she lived, and with it her hardships and suffering. She died when I was about seven years old, on one of my master's farms, near Lee's Mill. **I was not allowed to be present during her illness, at her death, or burial. She was gone long before I knew any thing about it. Never having enjoyed, to any considerable extent, her soothing presence, her tender and watchful care, I received the tidings of her death with much the same emotions I should have probably felt at the death of a stranger**.

I have had two masters. My first master's name was Anthony. I do not remember his first name. He was generally called Captain Anthony--a title which, I presume, he acquired by sailing a craft on the Chesapeake Bay. He was not considered a rich slaveholder. He owned two or three farms, and about thirty slaves. His farms and slaves were under the care of an overseer. The overseer's name was Plummer. Mr. Plummer was a miserable drunkard, a profane swearer, and a savage monster. He always went armed with a cowskin and a heavy cudgel. I have known him to cut and slash the women's heads so horribly, that even master would be enraged at his cruelty, and would threaten to whip him if he did not mind himself. **Master, however, was not a humane slaveholder. It required extraordinary barbarity on the part of an overseer to affect him. He was a cruel man, hardened by a long life of slaveholding. He would at times seem to take great pleasure in whipping a slave. I have often been awakened at the dawn of day by the most heart-rending shrieks of an own aunt of mine, whom he used to tie up to a joist, and whip upon her naked back till she was literally covered with blood. No words, no tears, no prayers, from his gory victim, seemed to move his iron heart from its bloody purpose.** The louder she screamed, the harder he whipped; and where the blood ran fastest, there he whipped longest. He would whip her to make her scream, and whip her to make her hush; and not until overcome by fatigue, would he cease to swing the blood-clotted cowskin. I remember the first time I ever witnessed this horrible exhibition. **I was quite a child, but I well remember it. I never shall forget it whilst I remember any thing. It was the first of a long series of such outrages, of which I was doomed to be a witness and a participant. It struck me with awful force. It was the blood-stained gate, the entrance to the hell of slavery, through which I was about to pass.** It was a most terrible spectacle. I wish I could commit to paper the feelings with which I beheld it.

This occurrence took place very soon after I went to live with my old master, and under the following circumstances. Aunt Hester went out one night,--where or for what I do not know,--and happened to be absent when my master desired her presence. He had ordered her not to go out evenings, and warned her that she must never let him catch her in company with a young man, who was paying attention to her, belonging to Colonel Lloyd. The young man's name was Ned Roberts, generally called Lloyd's Ned. **Why master was so careful of her, may be safely left to conjecture. She was a woman of noble form, and of graceful proportions, having very few equals, and fewer superiors, in personal appearance, among the colored or white women of our neighborhood.**

Aunt Hester had not only disobeyed his orders in going out, but had been found in company with Lloyd's Ned; which circumstance, I found, from what he said while whipping her, was the chief offence. **Had he been a man of pure morals himself, he might have been thought interested in protecting the innocence of my aunt; but those who knew him will not suspect him of any such virtue.**

Before he commenced whipping Aunt Hester, he took her into the kitchen, and stripped her from neck to waist, leaving her neck, shoulders, and back, entirely naked. He then told her to cross her hands, calling her at the same time a d--d b--h. After crossing her hands, he tied them with a strong rope, and led her to a stool under a large hook in the joist, put in for the purpose. He made her get upon the stool, and tied her hands to the hook. She now stood fair for his infernal purpose. Her arms were stretched up at their full length, so that she stood upon the ends of her toes. He then said to her, "Now, you d--d b--h, I'll learn you how to disobey my orders!" and after rolling up his sleeves, be commenced to lay on the heavy cowskin, and soon the warm, red blood (amid heart-rending shrieks from her, and horrid oaths from him) came dripping to the floor. I was so terrified and horror-stricken at the sight, that I hid myself in a closet, and dared not venture out till long after the bloody transaction was over. I expected it would be my turn next. It was all new to me. I had never seen any thing like it before. I had always lived with my grandmother on the outskirts of the plantation, where she was put to raise the children of the younger women. I had therefore been, until now, out of the way of the bloody scenes that often occurred on the plantation.

Chapter Two

I did not, when a slave, understand the deep meaning of those rude and apparently incoherent songs. I was myself within the circle; so that I neither saw nor heard as those without might see and hear. They told a tale of woe which was then altogether beyond my feeble comprehension; they were tones loud, long, and deep; they breathed the prayer and complaint of souls boiling over with the bitterest anguish. Every tone was a testimony against slavery, and a prayer to God for deliverance from chains. The hearing of those wild notes always depressed my spirit, and filled me with ineffable sadness. I have frequently found myself in tears while hearing them. The mere recurrence to those songs, even now, afflicts me; and while I am writing these lines, an expression of feeling has already found its way down my cheek. **To those songs I trace my first glimmering conception of the dehumanizing character of slavery**. I can never get rid of that conception. Those songs still follow me, to deepen my hatred of slavery, and quicken my sympathies for my brethren in bonds. If any one wishes to be impressed with the soul-killing effects of slavery, let him go to Colonel Lloyd's plantation, and, on allowance-day, place himself in the deep pine woods, and there let him, in silence, analyze the sounds that shall pass through the chambers of his soul,--and if he is not thus impressed, it will only be because "there is no flesh in his obdurate heart.

I have often been utterly astonished, since I came to the north, to find persons who could speak of the singing, among slaves, as evidence of their contentment and happiness. It is impossible to conceive of a greater mistake. Slaves sing most when they are most unhappy. The songs of the slave represent the sorrows of his heart; and he is relieved by them, only as an aching heart is relieved by its tears. At least, such is my experience. I have often sung to drown my sorrow, but seldom to express my happiness. Crying for joy, and singing for joy, were alike uncommon to me while in the jaws of slavery. The singing of a man cast away upon a desolate island might be as appropriately considered as evidence of contentment and happiness, as the singing of a slave; the songs of the one and of the other are prompted by the same emotion.

Chapter three

Colonel Lloyd owned so many that he did not know them when he saw them; nor did all the slaves of the out-farms know him. It is reported of him, that, while riding along the road one day, he met a colored man, and addressed him in the usual manner of speaking to colored people on the public highways of the south: “Well, boy, whom do you belong to?” “To Colonel Lloyd,” replied the slave. “Well, does the colonel treat you well?” “No, sir,” was the ready reply. “What, does he work you too hard?” “Yes, sir.” “Well, don’t he give you enough to eat?” “Yes, sir, he gives me enough, such as it is.”

The colonel, after ascertaining where the slave belonged, rode on; the man also went on about his business, not dreaming that he had been conversing with his master. He thought, said, and heard nothing more of the matter, until two or three weeks afterwards. The poor man was then informed by his overseer that, for having found fault with his master, he was now to be sold to a Georgia trader. He was immediately chained and handcuffed; and thus, without a moment’s warning, he was snatched away, and forever sundered, from his family and friends, by a hand more unrelenting than death. This is the penalty of telling the truth, of telling the simple truth, in answer to a series of plain questions.

It is partly in consequence of such facts, that slaves, when inquired of as to their condition and the character of their masters, almost universally say they are contented, and that their masters are kind. … They suppress the truth rather than take the consequences of telling it, and in so doing prove themselves a part of the human family. If they have any thing to say of their masters, it is generally in their masters’ favor, especially when speaking to an untried man. I have been frequently asked, when a slave, if I had a kind master, and do not remember ever to have given a negative answer; nor did I, in pursuing this course, consider myself as uttering what was absolutely false; for I always measured the kindness of my master by the standard of kindness set up among slaveholders around us.

Chapter five

I was probably between seven and eight years old when I left Colonel Lloyd's plantation. I left it with joy. I shall never forget the ecstasy with which I received the intelligence that my old master (Anthony) had determined to let me go to Baltimore, to live with Mr. Hugh Auld, brother to my old master's son-in-law, Captain Thomas Auld. **I received this information about three days before my departure. They were three of the happiest days I ever enjoyed. I spent the most part of all these three days in the creek, washing off the plantation scurf, and preparing myself for my departure.**

… The ties that ordinarily bind children to their homes were all suspended in my case. I found no severe trial in my departure. My home was charmless; it was not home to me; on parting from it, I could not feel that I was leaving any thing which I could have enjoyed by staying. My mother was dead, my grandmother lived far off, so that I seldom saw her. I had two sisters and one brother, that lived in the same house with me; but the early separation of us from our mother had well nigh blotted the fact of our relationship from our memories. I looked for home elsewhere, and was confident of finding none which I should relish less than the one which I was leaving. …

I look upon my departure from Colonel Lloyd's plantation as one of the most interesting events of my life. It is possible, and even quite probable, that but for the mere circumstance of being removed from that plantation to Baltimore, I should have to-day, instead of being here seated by my own table, in the enjoyment of freedom and the happiness of home, writing this Narrative, been confined in the galling chains of slavery. Going to live at Baltimore laid the foundation, and opened the gateway, to all my subsequent prosperity. I have ever regarded it as the first plain manifestation of that kind providence which has ever since attended me, and marked my life with so many favors.

Chapter Six

My new mistress. proved to be all she appeared when I first met her at the door,--a woman of the kindest heart and finest feelings. She had never had a slave under her control previously to myself, and prior to her marriage she had been dependent upon her own industry for a living. She was by trade a weaver; **and by constant application to her business, she had been in a good degree preserved from the blighting and dehumanizing effects of slavery. I was utterly astonished at her goodness. I scarcely knew how to behave towards her. She was entirely unlike any other white woman I had ever seen. I could not approach her as I was accustomed to approach other white ladies. My early instruction was all out of place. The crouching servility, usually so acceptable a quality in a slave, did not answer when manifested toward her. Her favor was not gained by it; she seemed to be disturbed by it. She did not deem it impudent or unmannerly for a slave to look her in the face.** The meanest slave was put fully at ease in her presence, and none left without feeling better for having seen her. Her face was made of heavenly smiles, and her voice of tranquil music.

But, alas! **this kind heart had but a short time to remain such. The fatal poison of irresponsible power was already in her hands, and soon commenced its infernal work. That cheerful eye, under the influence of slavery, soon became red with rage; that voice, made all of sweet accord, changed to one of harsh and horrid discord; and that angelic face gave place to that of a demon.**

Very soon after I went to live with Mr. and Mrs. Auld, she very kindly commenced to teach me the A, B, C. After I had learned this, she assisted me in learning to spell words of three or four letters. **Just at this point of my progress, Mr. Auld found out what was going on, and at once forbade Mrs. Auld to instruct me further, telling her, among other things, that it was unlawful, as well as unsafe, to teach a slave to read.** To use his own words, further, he said, "If you give a nigger an inch, he will take an ell. A nigger should know nothing but to obey his master--to do as he is told to do. Learning would *spoil* the best nigger in the world. Now," said he, **"if you teach that nigger (speaking of myself) how to read, there would be no keeping him. It would forever unfit him to be a slave. He would at once become unmanageable, and of no value to his master. As to himself, it could do him no good, but a great deal of harm. It would make him discontented and unhappy**." These words sank deep into my heart, stirred up sentiments within that lay slumbering, and called into existence an entirely new train of thought. **It was a new and special revelation, explaining dark and mysterious things, with which my youthful understanding had struggled, but struggled in vain.**

I now understood what had been to me a most perplexing difficulty--to wit, the white man's power to enslave the black man. It was a grand achievement, and I prized it highly. From that moment, I understood the pathway from slavery to freedom. It was just what I wanted, and I got it at a time when I the least expected it. Whilst I was saddened by the thought of losing the aid of my kind mistress, I was gladdened by the invaluable instruction which, by the merest accident, I had gained from my master. Though conscious of the difficulty of learning without a teacher, I set out with high hope, and a fixed purpose, at whatever cost of trouble, to learn how to read. The very decided manner with which he spoke, and strove to impress his wife with the evil consequences of giving me instruction, served to convince me that he was deeply sensible of the truths he was uttering. It gave me the best assurance that I might rely with the utmost confidence on the results which, he said, would flow from teaching me to read. **What he most dreaded, that I most desired. What he most loved, that I most hated. That which to him was a great evil, to be carefully shunned, was to me a great good, to be diligently sought; and the argument which he so warmly urged, against my learning to read, only served to inspire me with a desire and determination to learn. In learning to read, I owe almost as much to the bitter opposition of my master, as to the kindly aid of my mistress. I acknowledge the benefit of both.**

Chapter seven

I lived in Master Hugh's family about seven years. During this time, I succeeded in learning to read and write. In accomplishing this, I was compelled to resort to various stratagems. I had no regular teacher. My mistress, who had kindly commenced to instruct me, had, in compliance with the advice and direction of her husband, not only ceased to instruct, but had set her face against my being in- structed by any one else. It is due, however, to my mistress to say of her, that she did not adopt this course of treatment immediately. She at first lacked the depravity indispensable to shutting me up in mental darkness. It was at least necessary for her to have some training in the exercise of irresponsible power, to make her equal to the task of treating me as though I were a brute.

My mistress was, as I have said, a kind and tender-hearted woman; and in the simplicity of her soul she commenced, when I first went to live with her, to treat me as she supposed one human being ought to treat another. In entering upon the duties of a slaveholder, she did not seem to perceive that I sustained to her the relation of a mere chattel, and that for her to treat me as a human being was not only wrong, but dangerously so. Slavery proved as injurious to her as it did to me. When I went there, she was a pious, warm, and tender-hearted woman. There was no sorrow or suffering for which she had not a tear. She had bread for the hungry, clothes for the naked, and comfort for every mourner that came within her reach. Slavery soon proved its ability to divest her of these heavenly qualities. Under its influence, the tender heart became stone, and the lamblike disposition gave way to one of tiger-like fierceness. The first step in her downward course was in her ceasing to instruct me. She now commenced to practise her husband's precepts. She finally became even more violent in her opposition than her husband himself. **She was not satisfied with sim ply doing as well as he had commanded; she seemed anxious to do better. Nothing seemed to make her more angry than to see me with a newspaper. She seemed to think that here lay the danger.**

All this, however, was too late. The first step had been taken. Mistress, in teaching me the alphabet, had given me the *inch,* and no precaution could prevent me from taking the *ell.*
The plan which I adopted, and the one by which I was most successful, was that of making friends of all the little white boys whom I met in the street. As many of these as I could, I converted into teachers. …When I was sent of errands, I always took my book with me, and by going one part of my errand quickly, I found time to get a lesson before my return. I used also to carry bread with me, enough of which was always in the house, and to which I was always welcome; for I was much better off in this regard than many of the poor white children in our neighborhood. This bread I used to bestow upon the hungry little urchins, who, in return, would give me that more valuable bread of knowledge. … I used to talk this matter of slavery over with them. I would sometimes say to them, I wished I could be as free as they would be when they got to be men. "You will be free as soon as you are twenty-one, *but I am a slave for life!* Have not I as good a right to be free as you have?" These words used to trouble them; they would express for me the liveliest sympathy, and console me with the hope that something would occur by which I might be free.
I was now about twelve years old, and the thought of being *a slave for life* began to bear heavily upon my heart. Just about this time, I got hold of a book entitled "The Columbian Orator." Every opportunity I got, I used to read this book. Among much of other interesting matter, I found in it a dialogue between a master and his slave. The slave was represented as having run away from his master three times. The dialogue represented the conversation which took place between them, when the slave was retaken the third time. In this dialogue, the whole argument in behalf of slavery was brought forward by the master, all of which was disposed of by the slave. The slave was made to say some very smart as well as impressive things in reply to his master—things which had the desired though unexpected effect; for the conversation resulted in the voluntary emancipation of the slave on the part of the master.

The reading of these documents enabled me to utter my thoughts, and to meet the arguments brought forward to sustain slavery; but while they relieved me of one difficulty, they brought on another even more painful than the one of which I was relieved.... **As I read and contemplated the subject, behold! that very discontentment which Master Hugh had predicted would follow my learning to read had already come, to torment and sting my soul to unutterable anguish. As I writhed under it, I would at times feel that learning to read had been a curse rather than a blessing. It had given me a view of my wretched condition, without the remedy. It opened my eyes to the horrible pit, but to no ladder upon which to get out. In moments of agony, I envied my fellow-slaves for their stupidity. I have often wished myself a beast. I preferred the condition of the meanest reptile to my own. Any thing, no matter what, to get rid of thinking! It was this everlasting thinking of my condition that tormented me. There was no getting rid of it. It was pressed upon me by every object within sight or hearing, animate or inanimate. The silver trump of freedom had roused my soul to eternal wakefulness. …**

I often found myself regretting my own existence, and wishing myself dead; and but for the hope of being free, I have no doubt but that I should have killed myself, or done something for which I should have been killed. While in this state of mind, I was eager to hear any one speak of slavery. I was a ready listener. Every little while, I could hear something about the abolitionists. It was some time before I found what the word meant. It was always used in such connections as to make it an interesting word to me. If a slave ran away and succeeded in getting clear, or if a slave killed his master, set fire to a barn, or did any thing very wrong in the mind of a slaveholder, it was spoken of as the fruit of *abolition.* Hearing the word in this connection very often, I set about learning what it meant. The dictionary afforded me little or no help. I found it was “the act of abolishing;” but then I did not know what was to be abolished. Here I was perplexed. I did not dare to ask any one about its meaning, for I was satisfied that it was something they wanted me to know very little about.

I soon learned the names of these letters, and for what they were intended when placed upon a piece of timber in the shipyard. I immediately commenced copying them, and in a short time was able to make the four letters named. After that, when I met with any boy who I knew could write, I would tell him I could write as well as he. The next word would be, “I don’t believe you. Let me see you try it.” I would then make the letters which I had been so fortunate as to learn, and ask him to beat that. In this way I got a good many lessons in writing, which it is quite possible I should never have gotten in any other way. During this time, my copy-book was the board fence, brick wall, and pavement; my pen and ink was a lump of chalk. With these, I learned mainly how to write. I then commenced and continued copying the Italics in Webster’s Spelling Book, until I could make them all without looking on the book**. By this time, my little Master Thomas had gone to school, and learned how to write, and had written over a number of copy-books. These had been brought home, and shown to some of our near neighbors, and then laid aside. My mistress used to go to class meeting at the Wilk Street meeting- house every Monday afternoon, and leave me to take care of the house. When left thus, I used to spend the time in writing in the spaces left in Master Thomas’s copy-book, copying what he had written. I continued to do this until I could write a hand very similar to that of Master Thomas. Thus, after a long, tedious effort for years, I finally succeeded in learning how to write.**

Chapter nine

In August, 1832, my master attended a Methodist camp-meeting held in the Bay-side, Talbot county, and there experienced religion. I indulged a faint hope that his conversion would lead him to emancipate his slaves, and that, if he did not do this, it would, at any rate, make him more kind and humane. I was disappointed in both these respects. It neither made him to be humane to his slaves, nor to emancipate them. If it had any effect on his character, it made him more cruel and hateful in all his ways; for I believe him to have been a much worse man after his conversion than before. Prior to his conversion, he relied upon his own depravity to shield and sustain him in his savage barbarity; but after his conversion, he found religious sanction and support for his slaveholding cruelty. He made the greatest pretensions to piety. His house was the house of prayer. He prayed morning, noon, and night. He very soon distinguished himself among his brethren, and was soon made a class-leader and exhorter. His activity in revivals was great, and he proved himself an instrument in the hands of the church in converting many souls. His house was the preachers' home. They used to take great pleasure in coming there to put up; for while he starved us, he stuffed them. …

I have said my master found religious sanction for his cruelty. As an example, I will state one of many facts going to prove the charge. I have seen him tie up a lame young woman, and whip her with a heavy cowskin upon her naked shoulders, causing the warm red blood to drip; and, in justification of the bloody deed, he would quote this passage of Scripture—"He that knoweth his master's will, and doeth it not, shall be beaten with many stripes." …

I had lived with him nine months, during which time he had given me a number of severe whippings, all to no good purpose. He resolved to put me out, as he said, to be broken; and, for this purpose, he let me for one year to a man named Edward Covey.

Mr. Covey was a poor man, a farm-renter. He rented the place upon which he lived, as also the hands with which he tilled it. Mr. Covey had acquired a very high reputation for breaking young slaves, and this reputation was of immense value to him. It enabled him to get his farm tilled with much less expense to himself than he could have had it done without such a reputation. Some slaveholders thought it not much loss to allow Mr. Covey to have their slaves one year, for the sake of the training to which they were subjected, without any other compensation. He could hire young help with great ease, in consequence of this reputation. **Added to the natural good qualities of Mr. Covey, he was a professor of religion—a pious soul— a member and a class-leader in the Methodist church. All of this added weight to his reputation as a "nigger-breaker."** I was aware of all the facts, having been made acquainted with them by a young man who had lived there. I nevertheless made the change gladly; for I was sure of getting enough to eat, which is not the smallest consideration to a hungry man.

Chapter ten

If at any one time of my life more than another, I was made to drink the bitterest dregs of slavery, that time was during the first six months of my stay with Mr. Covey. We were worked in all weathers. It was never too hot or too cold; it could never rain, blow, hail, or snow, too hard for us to work in the field. …**I was somewhat unmanageable when I first went there, but a few months of this discipline tamed me. Mr. Covey succeeded in breaking me. I was broken in body, soul, and spirit. My natural elasticity was crushed, my intellect languished, the disposition to read departed, the cheerful spark that lingered about my eye died; the dark night of slavery closed in upon me; and behold a man transformed into a brute!**

Sunday was my only leisure time. I spent this in a sort of beast-like stupor, between sleep and wake, under some large tree. At times I would rise up, a flash of energetic freedom would dart through my soul, accompanied with a faint beam of hope, that flickered for a moment, and then vanished. I sank down again, mourning over my wretched condition. I was sometimes prompted to take my life, and that of Covey, but was prevented by a combination of hope and fear. My sufferings on this plantation seem now like a dream rather than a stern reality.

Our house stood within a few rods of the Chesapeake Bay, whose broad bosom was ever white with sails from every quarter of the habitable globe. Those beautiful vessels, robed in purest white, so delightful to the eye of freemen, were to me so many shrouded ghosts, to terrify and torment me with thoughts of my wretched condition. I have often, in the deep stillness of a summer's Sabbath, stood all alone upon the lofty banks of that noble bay, and traced, with saddened heart and tearful eye, the countless number of sails moving off to the mighty ocean. The sight of these always affected me powerfully. My thoughts would compel utterance; and there, with no audience but the Almighty, I would pour out my soul's complaint, in my rude way, with an apostrophe to the moving multitude of ships:—

“You are loosed from your moorings, and are free; I am fast in my chains, and am a slave! You move merrily before the gentle gale, and I sadly before the bloody whip! You are freedom’s swift-winged angels, that fly round the world; I am confined in bands of iron! O that I were free! O, that I were on one of your gallant decks, and under your protecting wing! Alas! betwixt me and you, the turbid waters roll. Go on, go on. O that I could also go! Could I but swim! If I could fly! O, why was I born a man, of whom to make a brute! The glad ship is gone; she hides in the dim distance. I am left in the hottest hell of unending slavery. O God, save me! God, deliver me! Let me be free! Is there any God? Why am I a slave? I will run away. I will not stand it. Get caught, or get clear, I’ll try it. I had as well die with ague as the
fever. I have only one life to lose. I had as well be killed running as die standing. Only think of it; one hundred miles straight north, and I am free! Try it? Yes! God helping me, I will. It cannot be that I shall live and die a slave. I will take to the water. This very bay shall yet bear me into freedom. The steamboats steered in a north-east course from North Point. I will do the same; and when I get to the head of the bay, I will turn my canoe adrift, and walk straight through Delaware into Pennsylvania. When I get there, I shall not be required to have a pass; I can travel without being disturbed. Let but the first opportunity offer, and, come what will, I am off. Meanwhile, I will try to bear up under the yoke. I am not the only slave in the world. Why should I fret? I can bear as much as any of them. Besides, I am but a boy, and all boys are bound to some one. It may be that my misery in slavery will only increase my happiness when I get free. There is a better day coming.”
Thus I used to think, and thus I used to speak to myself; goaded almost to madness at one moment, and at the next reconciling myself to my wretched lot.

You have seen how a man was made a slave; you shall see how a slave was made a man.
… Mr. Covey seemed now to think he had me, and could do what he pleased; but at this moment— from whence came the spirit I don't know—I resolved to fight; and, suiting my action to the resolution, I seized Covey hard by the throat; and as I did so, I rose. He held on to me, and I to him. My resistance was so entirely unexpected, that Covey seemed taken all aback. He trembled like a leaf. This gave me assurance, and I held him uneasy, causing the blood to run where I touched him with the ends of my fingers. Mr. Covey soon called out to Hughes for help. Hughes came, and, while Covey held me, attempted to tie my right hand. While he was in the act of doing so, I watched my chance, and gave him a heavy kick close under the ribs. This kick fairly sickened Hughes, so that he left me in the hands of Mr. Covey. This kick had the effect of not only weakening Hughes, but Covey also. When he saw Hughes bending over with pain, his courage quailed. He asked me if I meant to persist in my resistance. I told him I did, come what might; that he had used me like a brute for six months, and that I was determined to be used so no longer. … By this time, Bill came. Covey called upon him for assistance. Bill wanted to know what he could do. Covey said, "Take hold of him, take hold of him!" Bill said his master hired him out to work, and not to help to whip me; so he left Covey and myself to fight our own battle out. **We were at it for nearly two hours. Covey at length let me go, puffing and blowing at a great rate, saying that if I had not resisted, he would not have whipped me half so much. The truth was, that he had not whipped me at all. I considered him as getting entirely the worst end of the bargain; for he had drawn no blood from me, but I had from him. The whole six months afterwards, that I spent with Mr. Covey, he never laid the weight of his finger upon me in anger. … This battle with Mr. Covey was the turning-point in my career as a slave. It rekindled the few expiring embers of freedom, and revived within me a sense of my own manhood. It recalled the departed self- confidence, and inspired me again with a determination to be free.**

Chapter eleven

In the early part of the year 1838, I became quite restless. I could see no reason why I should, at the end of each week, pour the reward of my toil into the purse of my master. When I carried to him my weekly wages, he would, after counting the money, look me in the face with a robber-like fierceness, and ask, “Is this all?” He was satisfied with nothing less than the last cent. He would, however, when I made him six dollars, sometimes give me six cents, to encourage me. It had the opposite effect. I regarded it as a sort of admission of my right to the whole. The fact that he gave me any part of my wages was proof, to my mind, that he believed me entitled to the whole of them. I always felt worse for having received any thing; for I feared that the giving me a few cents would ease his conscience, and make him feel himself to be a pretty honorable sort of robber. My discontent grew upon me. I was ever on the look-out for means of escape; and, finding no direct means, I determined to try to hire my time, with a view of getting money with which to make my escape. **In the spring of 1838, when Master Thomas came to Baltimore to purchase his spring goods, I got an opportunity, and applied to him to allow me to hire my time. He unhesitatingly refused my request, and told me this was another stratagem by which to escape. He told me I could go nowhere but that he could get me; and that, in the event of my running away, he should spare no pains in his efforts to catch me. He exhorted me to content myself, and be obedient. He told me, if I would be happy, I must lay out no plans for the future. He said, if I behaved myself properly, he would take care of me. Indeed, he advised me to complete thoughtlessness of the future, and taught me to depend solely upon him for happiness. He seemed to see fully the pressing necessity of setting aside my intellectual nature, in order to contentment in slavery. But in spite of him, and even in spite of myself, I continued to think, and to think about the injustice of my enslavement, and the means of escape.**

In a self-pitying, condescending passage Frederick Douglass longs to return to his earlier unlettered state, when he was content to be a slave: "[Learning to read] opened my eyes to the horrible pit, but to no ladder upon which to get out. In moments of agony, I envied my fellow slaves for their stupidity. I have often wished myself a beast. I preferred the condition of the meanest reptile to my own. Any thing, no matter what, to get rid of thinking!" (p. 67). Douglass's juxtapositions—his yearning to be, in rapid succession, an ignorant slave, a beast, a reptile—reveal his acceptance of the Western assumption that the use of language distinguishes human from animal life. Without letters, Douglass suggests, the slave is "rid of thinking," is hardly higher than a beast.

Valerie Smith, *Self-discovery and Authority in Afro-American Narrative*, Harvard UP 1987

Moreover, he assumes that he yearns to be free only because he has read of freedom and abolition in such texts as "The Columbian Orator" and Sheridan's speeches on Catholic emancipation. He, like the slave owner, suggests that without letters, slaves fail to understand the full meaning of their domination.

There must be some truth to the formulations of Douglass, Angelou, Wright, and the rest, for in our literate culture success is in large measure linked to one's ability to read and write the official language. But since the time of the Roman state, literacy has been a tool of social organization and control, inspiring in the learner a respect for authority. The ability to read and write thus does not in and of itself guarantee freedom and sophistication of expression; the very structures of discourse themselves embody values and assumptions that may elude one's control. Letters, in other words, do not the intellect make. Douglass, Wright, Angelou, Malcolm X, and others might have found that literacy, narrowly defined, developed and organized their thoughts, but as Robert Pattison has written, "Literacy did not—does not ever by itself—awaken the passion of the mind."[3]

As many slave narrators and historians such as John Blassingame and Vincent Harding have shown, scores of unlettered blacks stole away from their enslavement without benefit of books that explained the meaning of freedom.[5] I would suggest that they as much as, if not more than, blacks who wrote accounts of their bondage and escape demonstrate the link between language and power. If we are to believe the historians and the narrators, the slaves' survival depended in large measure on their behaving in accordance with their masters' expectations. The figure of the docile, singing, pious, cheerful slave led slavery's apologists, and some twen-

To Tell a Free Story

The First Century of Afro-American Autobiography, 1760–1865

William L. Andrews

In the first 100 years of its existence, Afro-American autobiography was a genre chiefly distinguished by its rhetorical aims. During the first half of this century of evolution, most Afro-American autobiography addressed itself, directly or indirectly, to the proof of two propositions: (1) that the slave was, as the inscription of a famous antislavery medallion put it, "a man and a brother" to whites, especially to the white reader of slave narratives; and (2) that the black narrator was, despite all prejudice and propaganda, a truth-teller, a reliable transcriber of the experience and character of black folk. During the latter half of this century of evolution, the crucial themes of identity and veracity underwent much revision. Instead of defining the self according to traditional cultural models, greater and greater attention came to rest on those aspects of the self outside the margins of the normal, the acceptable, and the definable, as conceived by the predominant culture. Selfhood became identified increasingly with individuality. Prevailing norms for judging propriety in behavior, speech, and writing came to be judged according to the personal standards of some narrative "other." This other was a good deal less solicitous of the white reader's empathy and trust than earlier black autobiographical personae had been. Instead of appealing to the reader's moral values and literary expectations, this other tried to alienate the reader from these kinds of supports, thus disorienting but also freeing him or her to participate in a new kind of social and psychological agenda for the reading of black autobiography. By the end of the first century of Afro-American autobiography, the genre had become the scene of a complex discursive encounter presided over by a self-determining narrator who makes free with text and reader in the name of truth *to* self, a standard that left both identity and veracity problematically intermeshed in their own mutual relativity.

portant moral norms in their narration. Because these conditions—the relationship of peers between autobiographer and audience and the assumption of trustworthiness between peers—existed as a matter of course in the white American autobiographical tradition, the white autobiographer's letter to the world has always had a social, cultural, and linguistic sanction, though not always success. When black autobiographers addressed the white world, however, they could assume no such sanction for their self-affirming literary acts. Many undoubtedly realized that they would have to defend or explain away the same literary egoism that in a white autobiographer might be praised as American pride and self-reliance at its best.[4] Knowing that they could not assume an equal relationship with the average white American reader, blacks set about writing life stories that would somehow prove that they qualified as the moral, spiritual, or intellectual peers of whites. White America was willing to suspend disbelief and assume the sincerity of an autobiographer whom it identified as a political peer and a racial equal. However, the knowledge that they could not predicate their life stories on this racially based trust forced black autobiographers to invent devices and strategies that would endow their stories with the appearance of authenticity. This was perhaps the greatest challenge to the imagination of the Afro-

American autobiographer. The reception of his narrative as truth depended on the degree to which his artfulness could hide his art.

The slave as unreliable narrator

As a class, no group of American autobiographers has been received with more skepticism and resistance than the ex-slave. Before the rise of the abolition movement, free blacks in the North as well as enslaved blacks in the South were seen as an alien population recognizably "depraved," "vicious," and, for the most part, incorrigible. Abolitionist defenders of the Negro would not deny that the ex-slave had been morally "degraded" by slavery; they insisted, nevertheless, that he could be elevated from his "inferior" condition.[5] But how could readers of slave narratives be assured that this moral rehabilitation had been completed, especially when a leader in the American Anti-Slavery Society warned the public about the fugitive slave in the North: "Simple-hearted and truthful, as these fugitives appeared to be, you must recollect that they are slaves —and that the slave, as a general thing, is a liar, as well as a drunkard and a thief."[6] Of course, there were those in the abolitionist movement who put the matter in a much more sympathetic and potentially clarifying light. As Samuel G. Howe, an interviewer of runaways in Canada observed: "The negro, like other men, naturally desires to live in the light of truth; but he hides in the shadow of falsehood, more or less deeply, according as his safety or welfare seems to require it. Other things being equal, the freer a people, the more truthful; and only the perfectly free and fearless are perfectly truthful."[7]

From the exclusive focus on the “autos” and “bios” to the importance of the “graphein”

In this observation Howe tried to suggest that absolute "perfect" truth, a concept dear to evangelical abolitionism and nineteenth-century America in general, could not be used to measure the value of Afro-American autobiography since the demands of truthfulness and self-preservation were often at odds in the experience of blacks in America. Yet Howe was himself a prisoner of the semantic dichotomies of nineteenth-century moralizing; he could think of no label other than "falsehood" to apply to the words of a black narrator who could not see his way clear to "live in the light of truth." Today our sensitivity to the relativistic truth value of all autobiography and to the peculiar symbiosis of imperfect freedom and imperfect truth in the American autobiographical tradition makes it easier for us to regard the fictive elements of black autobiography as aspects of rhetorical and aesthetic strategy, not evidence of moral failure.

Most slave narrators knew that the public did not read their stories primarily to find out what sorts of men these blacks were. Nineteenth-century whites read slave narratives more to get a firsthand look at the institution of slavery than to become acquainted with an individual slave. Many ex-slaves were quite willing to accede to this expectation, especially when told by their abolitionist sponsors that their skeptical public would believe nothing but documentable facts in a slave narrative. From