

# I3

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## Beyond Douglass and Jacobs

Not very long ago, students taking a standard Survey of American Literature course that covered the years up to the Civil War would have encountered just one slave narrative, *The Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, an American Slave*, first published in 1845. These days, students in that course are likely to encounter two slave narratives – or rather, one complete narrative and about one-seventh of another. Both *The Norton Anthology of American Literature, 1820–1865* and *The Heath Anthology of American Literature – Early Nineteenth Century: 1800–1865* include exactly six of the forty-one chapters of Harriet Jacobs’s *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*.<sup>1</sup> The *Heath Anthology* also includes the work of four other African American writers, all collected together with Douglass and Jacobs in the section entitled “Race, Slavery and the Invention of the ‘South.’” In this volume of the *Norton Anthology*, Douglass and Jacobs are the only African American writers represented. Students who continue in the survey might encounter one or two other narratives – perhaps Booker T. Washington’s *Up From Slavery* (1901), for example. Most students interested in American literary history, then, and many of their teachers, will encounter fewer than a handful of narratives that will represent a genre that includes an estimated 6,000 texts – including books, periodical publications, and oral histories and interviews. Even in courses not burdened by the constraints of historical coverage that makes any survey course a challenge, Douglass’s 1845 *Narrative* and Jacobs’s *Incidents* (read in its entirety) are often the only slave narratives assigned; similarly, a great deal of scholarship on American literary and cultural history includes significant discussions only of Douglass (most often) or of Jacobs, or of the two together.

Douglass’s first narrative (of the three he published) and all or part of Jacobs’s *Incidents*, then, have some serious representative work to do. But what is being represented, and how should we understand that representation, and are the *Narrative* and *Incidents*, classics though they are, adequate for this work? Douglass, who in his own time was often viewed as

*the* representative of all African Americans, understood well the cultural politics of black representative identity in a white supremacist nation. In an 1865 speech at the inauguration of a school named for him, Douglass complained that “the public, with the mass of ignorance . . . has sternly denied the representative character of our distinguished men. They are treated as exceptions, individual cases, and the like.” “When prejudice cannot deny the black man’s ability,” Douglass noted, “it denies his race, and claims him as a white man. It affirms that if he is not exactly white, he ought to be,” and that “he owes whatever intelligence he possesses to the white race by contract or association.”<sup>2</sup> In his own time, Douglass’s mixed-race status sometimes did indeed play a role in his public recognition; in more recent times, Douglass has often been presented, implicitly and sometimes explicitly, as an exceptional figure in that his *Narrative* has been recognized not only as an important slave narrative but also as a unique literary achievement, one deserving of attention alongside of white writers of his time. Jacobs’s *Incidents*, on the other hand, was long ignored or devalued *because* it was an exception, both because it represents a woman’s perspective and because scholars suspected that white writers were involved in the production of the narrative. As Rafia Zafar has noted, “for breaking from [the] recognized pattern of male slave narrators – Harriet Jacobs is alone among antebellum female writers of book-length secular autobiographies – Jacobs was either decried as inauthentic or dismissed as atypical.”<sup>3</sup> *Incidents* was long assumed to be either the product of a white writer or, later, the achievement of a talented and tactful white editor. Subsequently, Jacobs has become the exceptional-representative woman to balance Douglass’s exceptional-representative man.

Of course, there are reasons why Douglass and Jacobs are considered to be both exceptional and representative. As Zafar notes, Jacobs is alone among US women who published a book-length slave narrative before the Civil War. Accordingly, although *Incidents* is not the only slave narrative that addresses the condition and situation of enslaved women, Jacobs’s is the only US book from this period that can represent the slave narrative genre from a woman’s perspective, making the book representative, in effect, by default. Jacobs’s success in presenting that perspective and transforming the conventions associated with this male-dominated genre is among the qualities that make *Incidents* such a stunning literary achievement. Douglass’s *Narrative*, on the other hand, was one of many book-length slave narratives authored by men, though Douglass is noted for his memorable representation of the masculine struggle with enslavement. But even in its own time, before most readers thought to question gendered perspectives, Douglass’s achievement in his *Narrative*, published shortly before he traveled to Great Britain to promote the antislavery movement, was celebrated

as a particularly eloquent and powerful example of the developing genre. As David W. Blight has noted, the *Narrative* “quickly became a best-seller. Much anticipated among abolitionists, it sold five thousand copies in the first four months of publication.”<sup>4</sup> Once abroad, “Douglass helped finance his British tour by selling the *Narrative*, which went through nine editions and sold eleven thousand copies between 1845 and 1847. By the eve of the Civil War in 1860, approximately thirty thousand copies of the *Narrative* had been sold on two continents, and the book had been translated into both French and German editions” (*Narrative*, p. 16). “Indeed,” Blight observes, “along with his public speeches, the *Narrative* made Frederick Douglass the most famous black person in the world” (*ibid.*). Jacobs – who had once worked in an antislavery reading room located above Frederick Douglass’s offices in Rochester, New York – long resisted requests that she write her story, and when she published *Incidents* in 1861, interest in slave narratives and the antislavery movement was being eclipsed by the Civil War. Unlike Douglass, and reflecting the significant difference between the public perception of a man’s story of former degradation and a woman’s, Jacobs did not place her name prominently on her book’s title page, and the book did not support a European speaking tour, though it did secure her a reputation in the abolitionist community that led to her career of aiding and educating the formerly enslaved during and after the Civil War.

Douglass was viewed as an exceptional-representative in his own time; Jacobs’s similar reputation came much later, when both *Incidents* and Douglass’s *Narrative* entered into the canon of American literary history – Douglass’s narrative firmly, and Jacobs’s more tentatively. Of course, the literary canon and what counts as public memory are both subject to the prerogatives of a racialized culture in which importance is measured mainly by one’s recognition in the white mainstream. As David Blight has noted of Frederick Douglass, and Sandra Gunning and Rafia Zafar have noted of Jacobs, black scholars had for some time read and studied the work and lives of Douglass and Jacobs, long before these nineteenth-century activists were “discovered” by white scholars and teachers, and in Douglass’s case long before the *Narrative* was reprinted for twentieth-century readers.<sup>5</sup> It is not surprising, then, that both the *Narrative* and *Incidents* received increasingly *official* attention – that is, new editions of the texts, scholarship noted by such national organizations as the Modern Language Association, and inclusion in mainstream literary anthologies – only after the Civil Rights Movement and the Black Studies Movement began to force the issue of the need to recover the texts of African American intellectual, cultural, and literary history. As Blight has noted, Douglass’s *Narrative* was out of print “for more than a century, from the 1850s to 1960” (*Narrative*, p. 17). “By the 1950s,” Blight

continues, “a genuine Douglass revival may be said to have begun among literary scholars, and through the civil rights revolution and the rediscovery of black history during the following decade, at least three new editions of the *Narrative* were published by 1968” (*Narrative*, p. 18). As Zafar notes, “one hundred and twelve years were to elapse between the anonymous publication of *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* and the first modern reprint edited by Walter Teller,” and “a century and a quarter would pass before Jacobs’s autobiography received a comprehensive, scholarly treatment by Jean Fagan Yellin” (“Introduction,” p. 4). *Incidents* received increasing attention after the publication of Yellin’s authoritative edition and eventually was included (one-seventh of it, anyway) in anthologies of American literary history, where Douglass’s *Narrative* had been holding the fort for African American literary self-representation for some time.

Rather quickly during its rise to prominence, *Incidents* was presented in scholarship and classrooms alike as the necessary corrective or counterbalance to the story of masculine struggle that Douglass presents in his *Narrative*. As Valerie Smith has argued, “by representing themselves as isolated heroic subjects, male slave narrators also defined their humanity in the terms of prevailing conceptions of American male identity.”<sup>6</sup> In telling a different story, and also in telling similar stories differently, *Incidents* served as a text that could expose the assumptions that guided not only Douglass’s experience but also his narration of his experience. In many ways, this was an important and appropriate part of the value of *Incidents* when it was first made widely available. Indeed, as is revealed by the selection of the six chapters of *Incidents* included in either the *Norton Anthology* or the *Heath Anthology*, Jacobs’s representation of an enslaved woman’s experience remains one of the most important considerations for many who read *Incidents* (thus limiting a woman’s perspective, in the process, to those moments when she is addressing most directly experiences that are gender-specific). As Deborah E. McDowell has noted, scholars and teachers have long “privileged and mystified Douglass’s narrative” by having it serve a “double duty: not only does it make slavery intelligible, but the ‘black experience’ as well.”<sup>7</sup> “It is this choice of Douglass as . . . ‘representative man,’” McDowell argues, “as the part that stands for the whole, that reproduces the omission of women from view, except as afterthoughts different from ‘the same’ (black men).”<sup>8</sup> Jacobs’s one-seventh representative status in anthologies suggests that the situation McDowell describes still prevails. But even when Jacobs is allowed fuller representation, her representative status can too easily be read against her intentions for her narrative. As Frances Smith Foster has argued, “rather than use her experiences as representative of others,” as Jacobs intended, “too many scholars and critics have used the

experiences of others to invalidate those that Jacobs recounted. Their interest revolves exclusively around Harriet Jacobs as both author and subject and around how her victories and her values contrast with prevailing theories and opinions of slave life.”<sup>9</sup>

Foster’s comments, along with the role of *Incidents* as truncated supplement to Douglass’s *Narrative*, raise serious questions about how and why we read slave narratives. What do these narratives and their authors represent, and how on earth can we know, given that attention to this history in our educational system is sketchy at best? As Foster indicates, readers generally bring a set of questions directed toward an insistent curiosity about the details of the lives of the enslaved. At times, these questions move quickly from the particular to the general, making Douglass’s *Narrative*, for example, a brief history of slavery – all one needs to know in roughly one hundred pages. Douglass stands in for all of the enslaved, and the *Narrative* is reduced to a list of horrors, a generalized tale of struggle. At times, as Foster suggests, these questions move from the general to the particular, as Jacobs’s narrative is tested against “prevailing theories and opinions of slave life” and her narration thereby judged either reliable or unreliable accordingly. Often, that is, teachers and students alike bring to the classroom (and even scholars sometimes to their studies) a set framework for understanding and responding to slave narratives, and a small and very general body of knowledge about slavery that they apply directly to individual narratives. The narrative, in effect, must say what readers expect it to say.

This was the case, in fact, when those who were once enslaved first published their stories or spoke at antislavery events. One text, for example, *Louisa Picquet, the Octoroon: or Inside Views of Southern Domestic Life*, features an extensive series of questions and answers between Picquet and Hiram Mattison, a white abolitionist. In his interview with Picquet, Mattison presses for details about sexual violations or other physical and mental abuse. Noting Mattison’s “prurient obsession” in this interview, Anthony G. Barthelemy has commented on the delicate tensions between Mattison and Picquet. “Responding to Mattison’s questions,” Barthelemy observes, “Picquet tells us something of her life in slavery and freedom. Mattison, however, was interested in the institution of slavery itself and in its attendant moral corruption. The minister failed to recognize Picquet as an individual; rather, she and her experiences served to substantiate his argument and to justify his self-righteousness and moral indignation.”<sup>10</sup> In his approach to understanding both Picquet and the system of slavery, Mattison himself becomes something of a representative figure; many white readers, then and today, resemble Mattison more than they might care to acknowledge. With such approaches in mind, the historian Robin Winks has called slave

narratives “the pious pornography of their day,”<sup>11</sup> stories of intimate violations that white Americans could read while still feeling that they were engaged in a benevolent exercise. In our day, reading a slave narrative for particular horrors and generalized outrage can enable readers to keep the story of slavery neatly generalized, safely individualized, or otherwise contained.

As we ask, then, whether it is enough to read just one of Douglass’s narratives and all or part of Jacobs’s, we need to ask as well *how* we read these and other narratives. What demands do we face when we encounter one or more of these texts, say, in a literature course? Often, as I’ve suggested already, slave narratives in literature courses are studied primarily for their content – the story told about slavery, the story of physical and psychological abuse, and the story of a brave escape from slavery. Read in this way, what makes these narratives count as *literature* is that the style shows conspicuous skill or that the authors demonstrate familiarity with the literary conventions and standards of their day, and especially those conventions and standards associated with white American literary history. What makes a particular narrative stand out is that a particular author (most often, Douglass or Jacobs) can write in such a way as to utilize those conventions while surpassing those standards – in terms, say, of stylistic grace or rhetorical skill. Certain episodes seem especially vivid – for example, Douglass’s account of the whipping of Aunt Hester that was for him “the blood-stained gate, the entrance to the hell of slavery.”<sup>12</sup> Certain phrases seem to capture especially well either the experience of slavery or the determination required to resist it. Many readers have commented, for example, on Douglass’s provocative statement, “You have seen how a man was made a slave; you shall see how a slave was made a man” (*Narrative*, p. 75). Many readers have noted as well the significance of Jacobs’s comment on the conclusion to her narrative: “Reader, my story ends with freedom; not in the usual way, with marriage.”<sup>13</sup> Here Jacobs’s invocation of the conventions of sentimental novels, which usually ended with marriage, is especially purposeful, for readers are pressed to realize that Jacobs has used literary conventions associated with courtship and marriage stories so as to emphasize the extent to which her condition removed her from the world in which many of her white female readers lived – thus emphasizing the extent to which hers is a story about both slavery and racism. Such moments have made Douglass’s *Narrative* and Jacobs’s *Incidents* the leading slave narratives in many courses – both in courses where the narratives are read as literature and in history courses where they are read to give vivid personal testimonies to the realities covered in scholarly studies of slavery.

For these reasons and others, Douglass’s 1845 *Narrative* and Jacobs’s *Incidents* are justly valued as great achievements – but students who read only

these texts are not at all in a position to appreciate (or question) the terms of this valuation. Certainly, most readers have no trouble understanding that these narratives tell important stories, for it is impossible to read them without a profound sense of the seriousness and complexity of their subject. Most readers would agree, then, that it would be a rather serious violation to read these narratives as literary achievements and say nothing about the content, or to treat the subject of slavery as just the occasion for these literary achievements. But it would be a serious violation as well to consider literary achievement as a separate category – that is, to consider rhetorical skill and stylistic grace simply as a remarkable sign of individual achievement, simply as the ability of Douglass or Jacobs to rise from their former enslaved position to such a level of education and literacy that they are able to fashion from their experience an extraordinary rhetorical performance. In fact, though, this is often the case. It is not unusual for readers of Douglass's *Narrative* and Jacobs's *Incidents* alike to express surprise that two people born in slavery, first, could write at all and, second, could write so well. Their skill as writers is celebrated, in effect, as an exceptional achievement – so that these writers who are asked to represent the slave narrative genre are considered as not representative at all but exceptional in their talent, and therefore in the position to represent the realities of enslavement. For many, what makes Douglass and Jacobs representative are the conditions under which they lived; what makes them remarkable is that they have reached a level of achievement that meets the standards even of those who have enjoyed the benefits of education and a privileged life. The style and art of slave narratives, then, are implicitly considered to be a measure of the narrator's success in transcending the world of slavery. As most slave narratives begin with slavery and end in freedom, so, too, is the distinction between content (slavery) and style (not just literacy, but rhetorical talent) viewed as a journey *away* from slavery.

The problem with this approach is that to separate style from content is to undermine the authority of the slave narrative *as a text* and of the writers of slave narratives *as authors*. Certainly, Douglass, Jacobs, and many others were justly proud of their achievements – but their approach to writing was not simply an attempt to encourage a doubting public (many of whom did not believe them capable of such writing) to admire their talent. They wrote not to display the extent to which they had escaped slavery; rather, they wrote to *get into the realities of slavery*, and to force their readers to recognize that, in fact, there *was* no escape from slavery, not for African Americans born into it, and not for white Americans in the North who had never experienced it. Authors of slave narratives did not write simply to celebrate their escape; they wrote because so many others remained enslaved, a condition that would not

change for many until the nation addressed the economic, political, social, and legal structures that supported slavery and the racial assumptions that extended from slavery. Both Douglass and Jacobs crafted their narratives to make exactly this point, but readers are in a position to fully appreciate the complexity and depth of this point only when they can recognize the complexity and depth of the *craft* of these narratives. It is difficult, however, to evaluate or even to recognize the craft of slave narratives if one knows little about the system of slavery and little about African American literary, political, and intellectual traditions. In short, how are we to read Douglass's *Narrative* and Jacobs's *Incidents* as representative slave narratives if we do not know anything about the genre of slave narratives that they are asked to represent? And given that Douglass and Jacobs are sometimes the only antebellum African American writers that students will encounter, how can those students come to a just and informed understanding of antebellum African American literature if they are encouraged to think that what is most African American about these texts is the subject – oppression experienced under slavery – and not the rhetorical response to that subject?

To appreciate the style of slave narratives, then, one must understand the challenges that Douglass, Jacobs, and other writers of slave narratives faced in trying to represent the system of slavery. Representing the system of slavery, as part of a larger effort to promote antislavery sympathy and activism, involved more than simply pointing to physical abuse or dramatic injustices. As Saidiya V. Hartman has observed, “the most invasive forms of slavery’s violence lie not in . . . exhibitions of ‘extreme’ suffering or in what we see but in what we don’t see. Shocking displays too easily obfuscate the more mundane and socially endurable forms of terror.”<sup>14</sup> The simple fact of enslavement, in other words, and the daily experience of that fact, was a form of terror that cannot be easily revealed by a strict narration of events or experiences, but the fact itself should have been enough for a nation that had fought a revolution for the abstract ideal of liberty. Slave narrators, who had survived and escaped not just episodic but daily experiences of the abuses of slavery, were constantly in the position of having to make an argument that should have been unnecessary. In a famous speech, Frederick Douglass asserted, “I submit, where all is plain there is nothing to be argued.” What argument should be necessary, Douglass wondered, to establish the injustice of slavery? Through a series of pointed questions, he emphasized the absurdity of his position: “Must I undertake to prove that the slave is a man?”; “would you have me argue that man is entitled to liberty?”; “must I argue that a system thus marked with blood, and stained with pollution, is *wrong*?”<sup>15</sup> Such arguments, Douglass asserted, should not be necessary in a nation whose founding document was the Declaration of Independence.



And yet, as Douglass and others recognized, such arguments were precisely the point of slave narratives.

For Douglass and others, what was wrong about slavery was its very existence as a systemic operation of laws, customs, and philosophy that threatened the stability and undermined the integrity of all of American culture. “The system of slavery,” wrote the great black abolitionist William Wells Brown, himself a fugitive slave, “is a system that strikes at the foundation of society, that strikes at the foundation of civil and political institutions.”<sup>16</sup> Indeed, the system of slavery affected every aspect of American culture, corrupting every institution, degrading every ideal, and touching every life. Even after slavery was abolished in the Northern states, it was still a strong economic and political presence, shaping Northern culture as well as national political life. African American abolitionists knew very well that true anti-slavery efforts would be those directed at fundamental systemic reform, addressing the rights of the nominally free as well as “freeing” those who were enslaved. As Frederick Douglass proclaimed in the same speech from which I’ve quoted above, “The existence of slavery in this country brands your republicanism as a sham, your humanity as a base pretense, and your Christianity as a lie.”<sup>17</sup> How can one hope to tell such a story? To tell it rightly would be to tell a story that reached to the “foundation of civil and political institutions”; to tell it rightly would be to question some of the most fundamental assumptions behind the larger story of American progress and political ideals. It is not surprising, then, that the stories that audiences, then as now, wanted most to hear were generally more manageable, more individual, focusing either on horrors that one can easily denounce or on struggles for freedom that one can heartily celebrate.

African American abolitionists knew that such expectations could not be ignored. In virtually all slave narratives, readers will encounter the kind of stories they expect to encounter – the “exhibitions of ‘extreme’ suffering” that Hartman discusses. I’ve noted, for example, Douglass’s account of his “entrance to the hell of slavery” through the “blood-stained gate” of abuse. Similarly, William Wells Brown, in his 1847 *Narrative of William W. Brown, A Fugitive Slave*, writes of a time when his mother was whipped: “Though the field was some distance from the house, I could hear every crack of the whip, and every groan and cry of my poor mother.”<sup>18</sup> In his *Narrative of the Life and Adventures of Henry Bibb, an American Slave* (1849), Bibb tells of losing a wife and child to slavery, and of his wife losing her honor to her owner. In the *Narrative of the Life of Henry Box Brown* (1851), Henry “Box” Brown even addresses the relative absence of such episodes in his narrative, speaking knowingly to his readers when he prefaces his narrative with the comment, “The tale of my own sufferings is not one of great

interest to those who delight to read of hair-breadth adventures, of tragic occurrences, and scenes of blood.”<sup>19</sup> In virtually all slave narratives, moreover, readers encounter stories of the journey to relative freedom in the North that quickly became part of the popular legends of the Underground Railroad, and many readers looked to these stories for brave escapes and heroic adventures. Indeed, in our own time, when the Underground Railroad has developed into an extremely popular story, it is instructive to think about the comments of an early scholar, Albert Bushnell Hart, who in 1899 wrote that those involved in the Underground Railroad were “enjoying the most romantic and exciting amusement open to men who had high moral standards.” “The Underground Railroad,” Hart continued, “was the opportunity for the bold and adventurous; it had the excitement of piracy, the secrecy of burglary, the daring of insurrection; to the pleasure of relieving the poor negro’s sufferings it added the triumph of snapping one’s fingers at the slave-catcher; it developed coolness, indifference to danger, and quickness of resource.”<sup>20</sup> As Hart describes it, the story of the Underground Railroad allows Americans to largely avoid the realities of slavery as a system of daily terror, turning their attention instead to a world of adventure, heroism, and justice – and to the brave and benevolent efforts of individual, heroic white people.

Writers of slave narratives were well aware of the interests and assumptions of their white readers, but they had a different story to tell – for they knew the realities of the system of slavery, and they knew as well the realities of racism in the North. They faced the challenge, then, of telling stories that few readers wanted to hear – and the art of telling the story that readers *want* to read so as to draw them into the story that they *need* to hear was the true art of the slave narrative. Accordingly, the style of the telling is very much a part of the story to be told, and those readers who read these books only to draw out the “facts” of slavery or of lives lived under oppression will miss the complexity of and artistry behind the stories these writers make of their experiences. The phrase “written by himself” or “written by herself” appears in the titles of many narratives, and this phrase draws our attention to the *act* of composing these stories and not just to the stories themselves. As James Olney has noted of Douglass’s *Narrative*, “there is much more to the phrase . . . than the mere laconic statement of a fact: it is literally part of the narrative, becoming an important thematic element in the retelling of the life wherein literacy, identity, and a sense of freedom are all acquired simultaneously, and without the first, according to Douglass, the latter two would never have been.”<sup>21</sup> Although not all writers of slave narratives learned how to read and write before they escaped from slavery, all would agree that literacy and liberty are complexly connected, and they used their various styles to tell stories that extended beyond the bare facts

of enslavement and escape. Some of these styles are seemingly rough, some are deceptively simple, some are quite direct, and some seem frustratingly indirect, before one realizes the point of the approach – but all seem designed to force the reader to look beyond the particular to the systemic, beyond the dramatic to the mundane, and beyond the fact of slavery in the South to the realities of racism in the North. In his approach to writing, for example, Douglass challenged the white antislavery consciousness that expected from him the rough and quaint style of a stereotypical slave, and in his balance of emotional restraint and outbursts of high eloquence, Douglass indicates that the story we are reading is not half the story that he could tell. Jacobs, as I've suggested, uses the conventions of sentimental literature to both relate to readers accustomed to such literature and to underscore the injustices of her situation. Bibb blends freely an energetic narrative style with what would be recognized as standard antislavery discourse (the kind of rhetoric and familiar phrasings that one would encounter regularly on the antislavery lecture circuit and in various antislavery publications). In all of these narratives, readers encounter familiar antislavery or sentimental rhetoric, but usually with a disturbing twist; they encounter adventure and heroism, but the narrative turns back to more recognizable terrors or more intimate threats (the threatened loss of one's child, for example); they encounter evils to denounce, but discover that those evils threaten the security of their own homes (for example, in the commentary on a corrupted Christianity common in most antebellum slave narratives). Slave narrators used style, in other words, to weave their experiences in and around the worlds in which their readers lived and to ask the reader to look at slavery from many different angles and not just through a single narrative perspective.

Just as there is no single position from which one can understand the realities of the system of slavery, so it is difficult to understand the complex cultural dynamics that are part of the historical "truth" of any slave narrative unless one is deeply versed in what Dwight A. McBride has called "the complex cognitive and narrative negotiations involved in telling the 'truth' about slavery."<sup>22</sup> The history of slavery includes not only slaveholders and slaves in the South and the North but also everyone who was invested in the system – economically, politically, and professionally as well as personally. The history of the antislavery movement includes not just heroic stories and brave fugitives but also the racist assumptions of seemingly benevolent white people and the limited understandings of antislavery sympathizers. To get a sense of that complex history – of the mundane, systemic terrors of slavery and of racial oppression – one needs to read a variety of narratives. The narratives themselves – including those written by former slaves, those reported to white writers, famous stories told again in print, or obscure stories told for

the first time – provide a context for understanding the narratives. Mattison’s curiosity about Picquet might lead one to question the nature of one’s interest in other narratives, for example. The differences between Solomon Northup’s *Twelve Years a Slave* (written by a white man) and the *Narrative of William W. Brown* (written by Brown himself) can raise important questions about where and when various aspects of slave culture are described in a narrative. The differences between the various versions of Josiah Henson’s life (largely influenced by white writers, and in which Henson is increasingly identified with Harriet Beecher Stowe’s character Uncle Tom), and the various versions of Douglass’s life (as he increasingly redefined himself over time) can raise serious questions about the possibilities and limitations of black public identity in the nineteenth century. Together, these and other narratives – representing different regions, different experiences, different perspectives, and different levels of public recognition and interest – provide an entrance into an unwritten history, a history that, as William Wells Brown put it in 1847, “has never been represented” and that “never can be represented.”<sup>23</sup> But this history, and this literary tradition, cannot be represented by just two prominent writers, and those writers, no matter how accomplished, cannot adequately represent themselves or their subjects in a vacuum.

Noting a similar problem in literary studies generally, Trudier Harris has expressed her concern about “the lack of training . . . in blacks, whites, and other folks who profess proficiency in the study of African American literature.”<sup>24</sup> Such scholars, Harris notes, are likely to “locate a few ‘points of entry’ into the literature, identify selected writers and works for focus, and ignore the bulk of the literature and the culture.”<sup>25</sup> “You will notice,” Harris continues, “that some of the same writers and titles keep popping up because . . . these are the strands of hair on the head of the literature. These are the popular ‘points of entry’ for folks coming to the literature to begin their explorations.”<sup>26</sup> Of course, everyone must begin somewhere, as Harris recognizes, but while “beginning at these points is *not* the problem,” she emphasizes, “*staying there is*.”<sup>27</sup> Although students cannot be expected to begin by reading everything, if the entrance to slave narratives is always limited to one of Douglass’s narratives and one (or one-seventh) by Jacobs, then students are more likely to encounter settled instruction on how to understand these narratives, and they are less likely to anticipate not only how much there is to understand but also how much of this historical presence, so neatly gathered under the term *slavery*, resists a settled understanding. To canonize just a couple of narratives (or fragments of narratives) is to present a dangerously simplified view of the past. Students who turn to *The American Heritage College Dictionary* for a definition of the word *canon* will find that the word refers to “a group of literary works generally accepted

as representing a field,” and that it also refers to “an established principle” and “a basis for judgment.” In the case of slave narratives, they will often encounter texts that have risen to representative status over a period of time when the field – not only slave narratives but the history of slavery – was obscured by inadequate knowledge or even misrepresentations. What, then, is the basis for judgment, and what or whom is being judged? Against the settled knowledge represented by the canon, it is important that students encounter a variety of texts that raise questions about a still unsettled and unsettling history. Only if we are reading our way into a world in which the questions overwhelm the answers and in which we find ourselves re-examining our most basic assumptions about US history and about our own practices as readers are we actually reading slave narratives.

## NOTES

1. Nina Baym et al. eds., *The Norton Anthology of American Literature, Volume B, American Literature, 1820–1865*, 6th edn. (New York: W. W. Norton, 2003); Paul Lauter et al. eds., *The Heath Anthology of American Literature, Volume B, Early Nineteenth Century, 1800–1865* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 2006). The *Norton Anthology* also includes three chapters from Douglass’s second narrative, *My Bondage and My Freedom*, along with his most famous speech, “What, to the Slave, Is the Fourth of July?”; the *Heath Anthology* includes that same speech and one of Jacobs’s letters.
2. “The Douglass Institute, Lecture at Inauguration of Douglass Institute, Baltimore, October, 1865,” in Philip S. Foner, *The Life and Writings of Frederick Douglass, Volume IV: Reconstruction and After* (New York: International Publishers, 1955), p. 179.
3. Rafia Zafar, “Introduction: Over-Exposed, Under-Exposed: Harriet Jacobs and *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*,” in *Harriet Jacobs and Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl: New Critical Essays*. Deborah Garfield and Rafia Zafar, eds. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), p. 4. Subsequent references will be cited parenthetically in the text.
4. David W. Blight, “Introduction: ‘A Psalm of Freedom,’” in David W. Blight, ed., *The Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, an American Slave, Written by Himself* (Boston: Bedford, 1993), p. 15. Subsequent references will be cited parenthetically in the text.
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