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Publishing Power: A Historiographical Investigation Into Treatments of American Slave Narratives

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Publishing Power: A Historiographical Investigation Into Treatments of American Slave Narratives

An Honors Thesis

Presented to

The Faculty of the Department of History

Colby College

In partial fulfillment of the requirements for the

Degree of Bachelor of Arts

By

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May 2024

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Introduction:

Background:

In the 1800s, European powers around the world grappled with their role in the system of slavery, from utilizing slavery in their colonies for economic gain to gradually banning the slave trade in their respective countries. Some four hundred years after the first enslaved people from Africa were publicly sold to Portugal, in 1833 the Parliament of the United Kingdom passed the Slavery Abolition Act. The Slavery Abolition Act of 1833 marked the first formal call for the abolition of chattel slavery by a European power. That same year, the American Anti-Slavery Society was established and began building its case for the immediate abolition of slavery in the United States. Inspired and aided by the British abolitionist model, the American Anti-Slavery Society leveraged the testimonies and narratives of enslaved/formerly enslaved peoples in promoting the abolitionist cause. Although enslaved people in America had already been publishing autobiographical narratives before abolitionist involvement, the time between 1836 and the beginning of the American Civil War (1861) marked a new era of narratives by enslaved people. The publication and study of these "second-wave" or second-era narratives are the general focus of this thesis.

Some formerly enslaved persons independently published their narratives, printing their stories in newspapers or as pamphlets. However, the narratives that received critical acclaim and achieved popularity were generally published with the assistance of a white abolitionist editor/publisher. In producing these narratives, white editors had the power to include, exclude, or rewrite portions of the narrative themselves. As such, for the remainder of this thesis, the term "slave narratives" will be used to refer to any autobiographical text (about the subject's life, from

their point of view) written or narrated before the Civil War (with a specific focus on "second-wave" narratives written from 1836-1861) by, in part or whole, an enslaved/formerly enslaved person, about their life while enslaved. The term "narrator" will therefore refer to the enslaved/formerly enslaved person whose life is detailed in the narrative.

Abolitionists and narrators understood the rhetorical power of literature and the persuasive value of a true story/testimony in accelerating change in American attitudes towards slavery. Slave narratives told the stories of enslaved people's lives during slavery, exploring day-to-day horrors and the general existence of slaves, social relationships and dynamics, material conditions of their life, and insights into the narrators' perspectives, personalities, and beliefs. Generally writing with an intention to inform and persuade white Northern audiences, these narratives exposed systems and ways of life readers knew little to nothing about and had not experienced firsthand. For abolitionists, the point of this exposure was to show white readers the cruelties of the system so they would join the cause for abolishing slavery. For narrators, these goals were shared but they were tempered by an acute consciousness of the need to tell their stories in a way that would not alienate their publishers and audiences.

Establishing and reinforcing the authenticity and credibility of the narrator and their story was paramount to the abolitionists' strategy. Abolitionist publishers and editors would obtain multiple documents from slave owners, traders, or any other white actors whose testimonies could confirm that the narrator was a real person who had worked, traveled, or been in the places they wrote about. The logic was that if the narratives were corroborated by other documents, the testimonies in the narratives would be taken more seriously. These efforts also exemplify the extent of involvement abolitionists had in the slave narrative's final product.

While cultural and editorial constraints limited both the form and content of slave narratives, many narrators found ways to exercise agency over their stories, all while working in and being aware of a publishing industry and scholarly debate they did not control.

Slave narratives have been a source of debate, discussion, and disagreement since their initial publication over a century ago. Despite abolitionist efforts to verify narrators' stories, issues of the veracity and authenticity of slave narratives plagued the study of American slavery for decades. As highly controversial documents, there have been long stretches of time where publishers ceased to publish slave narrators and historians disregarded slave narratives as legitimate primary sources about slavery. Today, the treatment of slave narratives is radically different. They are integrated into classroom teachings about American history and act as source documents and foundational touchstones for scholars of American and African American history, culture, and literature. Slave narratives' trajectory of scholarly treatment over time has not been linear or obvious. It is in these nuances and complexities that my project finds its origins.

Purpose and Argument:

The purpose of this project is to document and analyze the factors that contributed to periods of interest in, and literature/scholarship on, American slave narratives, with particular emphasis on the role of publishers and publication (or non-publication). The specific historiographical survey focuses on three distinct time periods: 1845 to 1929, the 1960s through the 1980s, and the 2000s through the 2020s, with the epilogue focusing on the most recent scholarship. I have chosen these time periods because they represent periods in which there were notable evolutions in the ways the narratives have been studied in America, many of which can

be linked to changes in publication trends. Such evolutions involve changes in 1) whether the narratives were studied or disregarded (by whom) and why, 2) the capacity in which the narratives were read or trusted, 3) the disciplinary approaches or theoretical frameworks that were employed when studying the narratives, 4) the purposes or motivations behind studying the narratives, and 5) the way information from narratives was then applied to broader studies/understandings of concepts such as American slavery, the American South, or American history. Each change in the study of these narratives can be contextualized by the historical and intellectual moment in which these scholarly histories were written, and the publishing context in which they arose.

While all scholars are influenced, consciously or unconsciously, by social and other contexts in which they work, I will argue that in the case of American slave narratives, publishers play an outsized role in filtering the stories scholars tell and the histories scholars propagate. Ultimately, a detailed study into the scholarship on slave narratives, taking careful consideration of publication history, reveals how publishers' responsiveness to their cultural context is mirrored in the significant impact they have on what literature is deemed relevant or important, ultimately manifested in what literature is made accessible to wider audiences at that time. At their discretion, publishers can make certain written source materials available in particular formats, giving scholars and readers greater access to documents they may not have been able to (or may not have tried to) obtain previously. By including a publishing history in the historical study of slave narratives, readers will gain a deeper understanding of the ever-evolving historiography of American slave narratives, including how and why the study of slave narratives has remained relevant and continues to change.

In this way, the purpose of this project is two-fold. First, to conduct a rich historiographical analysis and account of scholarship on slave narratives over time by using scholars works/articles/books/essays/anthologies as primary sources for this research, and second, to highlight the roles of publishers when weighing the influences that shaped scholarly work and opinion on the narratives.

Method:

Using a historiographical approach, I was chiefly interested in what scholars, historians, academics, and intellectuals had written about slave narratives. To achieve the aims of my project, I employed these secondary sources as primary sources in my research, analyzing what authors had to say and contextualizing the social/cultural, political, or academic moment in which they were writing. In pursuit of recreating the wider scholarly landscape, I also put writers in conversation with their contemporaries and influential predecessors. Due to the scope of this project, my selection of sources largely centers on widely accepted, mainstream scholarly schools of thought as a way to trace the evolutions of thinking on and uses of slave narratives through time. Although I could not highlight all dissenting scholars or those who thought significantly outside the conventions of their contemporaries, I tried to include the most essential moments of tension and complexity in the field, especially by illuminating the concurrent treatment of slave narratives by Black American intellectuals. Although not all of these Black scholars published writings about slave narratives, they nonetheless preserved, distributed, studied them, and employed them for cultural and political aims, even, or especially, in moments when few others were paying attention to the narratives.

Identifying publishing statistics or information about publishers at the time of initial publication (1830s-1860s) proved to be difficult, as most of these figures were not reliably recorded. As a result, the majority of information about publishers of slave narratives in this work was corroborated over multiple, verifiable secondary sources. The fourth chapter spotlights a recent generation of scholars who are interested in the pursuit of these statistics and information, advocating for historians to work with scholars in other disciplines to uncover these important details.

Literature Review:

Most of my thesis is effectively a literature review as I record and contextualize what scholars have said over time about slave narratives. There were several works that were fundamental in guiding my research. Of utmost importance to my thesis were the books *The Slave's Narrative* (1985) by Charles T. Davis and Henry Louis Gates Jr., *That Noble Dream* (1988) by Peter Novick, and *The Slave Narrative: Its Place in American History* (1946) by Marion Wilson Starling.

Davis and Gates Jr.'s *The Slave's Narrative* (1985) traced the development of writing on enslaved people's narratives from 1750 to the 1980s. These essays gave me countless jumping-off points, from Davis and Gates Jr.'s interpretations of the importance of slave narratives as historical material and literary artifacts, to names of prominent historians and thinkers across time periods. Whenever I was at a loss as to where to find more information, *The Slave's Narrative* acted as my primary knowledge base. Furthermore, the structure of *The Slave's*

Narrative served both as inspiration for this project as well as a challenge for this thesis to go beyond their book in terms of contextualization, time periods covered, and scope.

Peter Novick's *That Noble Dream* (1988) offered an analysis and record of the shifting and evolving contours of the discipline of history in America, especially during the time periods I spent considerable time researching. Read alongside *The Slave's Narrative,* Novick supplied the necessary contextualization to make sense of the changing perspectives and interpretations of the narratives. His book not only considered changes in the discipline, but how those changes corresponded to larger cultural, political, and intellectual events, moments, and developments.

Finally, Marion Wilson Starling's dissertation *The Slave Narrative: Its Place in American History* (written in 1946 and published in 1981) served as a poignant reminder that the study of history and the progress of this discipline is rarely linear. Her groundbreaking use of sources, analysis, and conclusions about slave narratives were far ahead of their time. Though her work was referenced by scholars for decades, it did not reflect mainstream historical thought until it was published more widely in 1981, decades after it was written. Like the narratives themselves, reading Starling's work is a reminder that acceptance in the field is not the only, and should not be the chief, criteria for determining the importance of a work. Starling pushed me to research understudied topics and take up disruptive approaches and angles in my studies.

Chapter Overview:

The first chapter explores the initial reception of slave narratives published between 1836 and 1861, looking at both Northern and Southern responses and reactions. Bolstered by impressive publishing statistics, I will make the argument that the seeming popularity and wide

reach of slave narratives pre-1830s makes their near-disappearance after the Civil War significant and worth exploring. Although slave narratives were widely published immediately before and during the Civil War, slave narratives were all but ignored in the war's aftermath, until enough time had passed that scholars could begin studying the Antebellum time period as history. In the early 1900s and 1910s, the first historians of the Antebellum South took issue with slave narratives' authenticity and veracity and publication of these documents by mainstream publishers lapsed. Supplemented by racist conceptions of the Black narrators, historians turned their backs on slave narratives as primary sources for almost thirty years.

The second chapter examines the slow undoing and reconsideration of dismissive attitudes toward slave narratives. Specifically, changing understandings of race in the 1930s and 1940s drove the campaign to reconsider the value of slave narratives, ultimately discrediting the stance on slave narratives popularized by Ulrich B. Phillips, the figurehead of scholarship on the American South and slavery during that period. However, because of the lack of publications after the Civil War, scholars at that time had difficulty accessing primary source slave narratives and as a result, did not generate many notable or novel interpretations of the narratives during that period. Marion Wilson Starling's 1946 dissertation was a notable exception. Starling engaged in deep archival work to build arguments about slave narratives, however, her difficulty in finding a publisher showed that Americans were not yet interested in these histories. Ushering in a new era, the neoabolitionist movement of the 1950s foreshadowed a time of great innovative thought on slave narratives starting in the 1960s.

The third chapter traces impressive developments in the scholarship on slave narratives in the 1960s, 1970s, and 1980s. I argue that these developments were made possible and facilitated by the republishing of narratives in the 1960s, which made slave narratives easily accessible to

scholars and the public alike. Bolstered by the revolutionary ideologies of the Second Reconstruction, scholars developed more nuanced and persuasive arguments about various aspects of slave narratives. The publishing of the Works Progress Administration (WPA) interviews in 1972 further ignited interest in narratives by enslaved people, encouraging scholars to put the interviews in conversation with slave narratives in order to corroborate details about day-to-day life in slavery. Finally, the 1980s saw a shift in scholarly focus from the content of the narrative to the form itself. Scholars debated passionately along the lines of what genre the narratives can be considered, whether they fit the formal definition of autobiography, and what difference these distinctions make (if any) to how the narratives are used and understood.

The fourth chapter looks at the most recent decades of scholarship to make sense of what precedes such generative decades of scholarship. Most works regarding slave narratives in this generation are published as anthologies or collections of essays, thus offering readers greater access to slave narratives, but also guiding readers in forming their own opinions and interpretations. After decades of scholarship, slave narratives have become an accepted and expected part of studying slavery and the American South. However, scholars contend that some narratives have still not reached the attention they deserve, such as narratives by enslaved women or those published outside of the bound book form (as pamphlets, church sermons, articles in newspapers, and so on). Furthermore, scholars argue for the inclusion of a book history approach or consideration of print culture studies in research on or about slave narratives. These new approaches, scholars argue, will further contextualize the production of the narratives, thus pushing scholars to think beyond accepted understandings of the narratives.

Finally, the epilogue considers how twenty-first-century ideas on race color novel interpretations about the place of slavery in understanding America today. Notable cultural

moments such as the publication of the 1619 Project (first in the New York Times Magazine in 2019) and the Black Lives Matter protests in 2020 provide some of the context for the new lens through which slavery has recently been reinterpreted. It is too soon to say how these developments might impact the study of slave narratives, but the conditions indicate that scholarship may be on the brink of another revival of early Black literature.

Chapter 1: Popular Beginnings and Early Dismissals: 1845-1929

Frances Smith Foster, professor of African-American studies at Emory University, describes slavery at the beginning of the nineteenth century as a "relatively unimportant issue."[1] That is, she writes, until a number of events occurred that pushed the issue of slavery to the forefront of the national consciousness, such as the Compromise of 1850 and the Kansas-Nebraska Act of 1854.[2] Such developments in the United States demonstrated to disengaged Northerners that slavery had economic implications for them as well. At the same time, the abolitionist movement in America was growing more radical, ready to work alongside enslaved people to achieve their abolitionist goals. It is within this context that the second era, or second-wave, of slave narratives were published and found relatively great popularity and commercial success among white, Northern audiences. Generally, this second-wave of narratives refers to those written between 1836 and the Civil War.[3] In addition to being written with the assistance of abolitionist, second-wave slave narratives are distinct in that they generally followed the same literary patterns and conventions, making up what scholars would later consider their own literary genre. This (seeming) uniformity set second-wave narratives apart from slave narratives written before the abolitionist movement gained strength in America.

Drawing on elements of other popular novels at the time, Foster explains that the protagonists of second-wave slave narratives were Christians who "endured great misfortunes, effected dangerously desperate escapes, and then, perhaps most important, did not seek

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[1] Frances Foster Smith, *Witnessing Slavery: The Development of Ante-bellum Slave Narratives* (The University of Wisconsin Press, 1979), 54.
[2] Smith, *Witnessing Slavery,* 54.
[3] Marion Wilson Starling, *The Slave Narrative: Its Place in American History* (G.K. Hall, 1981), 106.

revenge."[4] Such stories were gripping, compelling, and garnered a sizable white audience. But what really made slave narratives compelling to white audiences of the time was that, unlike popular novels, they were not fictional. One reviewer in 1849 explained that in slave narratives the "[s]tartling incidents authenticated, far excelling fiction in their touching pathos…"[5] In this sense, the real horror of the stories in slave narratives struck emotional, empathetic chords in a way that fabricated, fictional narratives could not.

Second-wave (1936-1861) slave narratives reached relative popularity due, in large part, to the publishing practices that kept them in front of both casual readers and scholars. Encouraged by strong sales, publishers put out significant numbers of copies of certain narratives, running multiple editions of others, sometimes in additional languages.[6]
One historian notes that "The economic potential of this genre was such that even smaller publishing houses sometimes participated in re-publishing those works that had proven their market value."[7] Smaller publishing houses still dedicated resources to printing slave narratives, indicating that there was enough demand for slave narratives that even smaller publishers were generating sales. Furthermore, the time between the 1770s and 1840s saw an "emerging, capitalist literary market" that made it possible for the narratives to achieve popularity.[8] Other changes in the publishing industry at the time also benefited slave narratives, such as the advent of larger publishing firms with more resources for marketing, decreased printing costs due to technological advancements, and marketing strategies that reached out to readers on a national

[4] Ibid.
[5] Lucius C. Matlack, introduction to *Narrative of the Life Adventures of Henry Bibb, An American Slave, Written by Himself,* by Henry Bibb (New York: published by the author, 1849).
[6] Henry Louis Gates Jr., *The Classic Slave Narratives* (Signet Classics, 2002), xv.
[7] Philip Gould, "The rise of the slave narrative" in *The Cambridge Companion to the African American Slave Narrative* (Cambridge University Press, 2007), 21.
[8] Gould, "The rise of the slave narrative," 22.

scale.[9] Slave narratives undoubtedly achieved success in part due to a growing literary market and advancing publishing industry.

Some statistics for the second-wave of slave narratives were that Solomon Northup's narrative *The Narrative of Solomon Northup* sold 27,000 copies in 1853 and 1854, four editions of William W. Brown's narrative *Narrative of the Life of William W. Brown, a Fugitive Slave, Written by Himself* were produced in its first year and 8,000 copies were sold by 1849.[10] By the same year, seven editions of Frederick Douglass' *Narrative* (1845) had been published.[11] These impressive statistics speak to the interest of average readers in these compelling narratives.

From the mid-nineteenth to the beginning of the twentieth century scholars generally offered one of two interpretations of slave narratives. On one hand, there is an early body of abolitionist and scholarly work in the mid to late nineteenth century that recognizes the inherent value of these first-person accounts and positions slave narratives as a uniquely American literary form, embodying a microcosm of America itself. Although it is not entirely discernible which was the cause and which was the effect, this view predominated at a time when the publication of slave narratives was on the rise. On the other hand, in the early 1900s, there were many scholars who dismissed the value of the narratives based on the scholars' racist ideas about Black writing. This view coincided with a waning of interest in and publication of slave narratives.

As a result of the narratives' ubiquity and appeal, many educated readers left reviews of the narratives in the 1840s and 1850s. These reviews offer invaluable insight into how the narratives were immediately received and understood, especially by those who read with sufficient interest and education to leave a critical review.

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[9] Ibid.
[10] Gates Jr., *The Classic Slave Narratives,* xv.
[11] Arna Bontemps, "The Slave Narrative: An American Genre" in *Great Slave Narratives* (Beacon Press, 1969), xvii.

In 1849, in the midst of a publishing boom of slave narratives, Reverend Ephraim Peabody wrote an article for the *Christian Examiner* titled "Narratives of Fugitive Slaves," outlining his interpretation of the value of slave narratives. His review reflects some of what he believes were the reasons for slave narratives' rise to prominence during this period, while also reflecting on the nature of America more broadly. Peabody describes slave narratives as "remarkable productions of the age" as they paint a picture of slavery "by the slave" rather than from an outsider's perspective.[12] Authorship is a compelling factor in why the narratives are "remarkable" to Peabody and other readers. The telling of slavery by the enslaved person played a sizable role in the appeal of slave narratives to the reader at the time, as opposed to novels with similar plot elements.

For Peabody, slave narratives are a quintessentially American literary form, telling stories that are exclusively and intrinsically American. He explains how slave narratives "[disclose]... the mixed elements of American civilization," demonstrating how forceful "the native love of freedom [is] in the individual mind."[13] Peabody points to a love for freedom which he believes is "native" to America and therefore an active force in the minds of those in America. The production of slave narratives is a "vivid exhibition" of freedom's power - that compelled formerly enslaved people to write their narratives in the manner they did. Although Peabody was not an abolitionist, his comments echo abolitionists' motivations behind publishing, editing, and urging formerly enslaved people to narrate their life stories.

Other reviews from the time emphasize the admirable qualities of the narratives. Lucius C. Matlack in 1849 called slave narratives "some of the most brilliant productions" whose logic would be effective in abolishing slavery. He asserts that the narratives will "become a monument

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[12] Ephraim Peabody, "Narratives of Fugitive Slaves" *Christian Examiner* (1849).
[13] Ibid.

more enduring than marble" whose influence will be long-lasting.[14] Another reviewer in Putnam's Monthly in 1855 exclaimed that no other story about overcoming adversity is "so impressive as the case of a solitary slave… surrounded by none but enemies."[15] These reviews speak to the high regard with which slave narratives were held by some at the time they were published.

Regardless of opinion on slavery, abolition, or the literary value of slave narratives as a category, due to the widespread publication and dissemination of slave narratives at that time most Americans in the mid-nineteenth century were aware of slave narratives and had some familiarity with stories about the experiences of enslaved peoples in some form. For instance, not definitionally a "slave narrative" but based loosely on the life of Josiah Henson, an enslaved person, Harriet Beecher Stowe's best-selling novel *Uncle Tom's Cabin* (1852) sold 300,000 copies the first year and, by 1857, two million copies were sold worldwide.[16]

In fact, the slave narrative was so popular and compelling that it spurred white Southerners to write their own novels in order to counter the slave narrative. One writer in the *Southern Quarterly Review* called upon other Southern white men in 1853 to publish their own stories, writing, "Let the people of the South make it a point to buy and read the writings of their own men."[17] The men the author refers to here are, of course, white, Southerners. The turn towards urging readers to only read literature by white authors also attests to how, in the words of the *Southern Literary Messenger* in 1855, "literature has been the most powerful weapon"

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[14] Quoted in Henry Bibb, *Narrative of the Life Adventures of Henry Bibb, An American Slave, Written by Himself*, introduction by Lucius C. Matlack (New York: published by the author, 1849), i.
[15] "American Literature and Reprints," *Putnam's Monthly*, November, 1855, 47.
[16] "Today in History - June 5", *Library of Congress,* https://www.loc.gov/item/today-in-history/june-05/#:~:text=In%20March%201852%2C%20a%20Boston,were%20sold%20worldwide%20by%201857.
[17] Charles T. Davis and Henry Louis Gates Jr., *The Slave's Narrative* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1985), xvii.

both in fighting the anti-slavery cause and in defending against it.[18] To combat the influence of slave narratives, the *Southern Literary Messenger* continues, Southern white men must write their literature "for the maintenance of our position, and justification before the world."[19] In other words, due to their intrinsic value and widespread publication and dissemination, the slave narrative has been so effective in advancing the abolitionist cause that the *Southern Literary Messenger* called upon Southerners to take action using the same tools (literature) to promote/protect their way of life and uphold slavery.

The most notable manifestation of these calls for publishing "Southern" literature to counter the views propagated so effectively through slave narratives were "anti-Uncle Tom" novels, written largely in response to Harriet Beecher Stowe's *Uncle Tom's Cabin* (1852).[20] Written by proslavery advocates in the 1850s, these novels depicted slavery and the surrounding Southern society positively, featuring people who were happily enslaved.[21] Such presentations should be read as direct responses to slave narratives, which alternatively focused on the terrible realities of slavery from the enslaved person's point of view.

Acknowledging the widespread reach and popularity of slave narratives among the general population in the mid-nineteenth century makes it even more difficult to understand the gap in scholarship and general discourse about such writing observed in the years that followed the American Civil War (1861-1865).

After the Civil War ended, the publication and study of slave narratives largely lapsed. For almost sixty years after the Civil War concluded in 1865, very little was written about slave narratives, much less any significant critical scholarship produced. Put simply, many Americans

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[18] Davis and Gates Jr., *The Slave's Narrative*, xvii.
[19] Ibid, xvii.
[20] Katharine A. Burnett, "The Proslavery Social Problem Novel: Maria J. Macintosh's Narrative of Reform in the Plantation South," *College Literature* 42, no. 4 (2015): 620.
[21] Burnett, "The Proslavery Social Problem Novel," 620.

(especially white American Southerners) did not want to dwell on what they were coming to understand as an embarrassing and unjustifiable past. As a result, slave narratives published after the Civil War "failed to generate comparable sales" to the ones published in earlier decades, as they lacked interested audiences to pay for and read them.[22] Rather than taking steps to rekindle interest in these important primary sources, publishers, in turn, slowed or abandoned publication of the narrative, and it was not long before the narratives "had been all but erased from the American public's consciousness."[23] Barring rare exceptions, the lack of new copies of narratives and the "mysterious disappearance of source materials" on the enslaved experience in the South meant that the next generation of Americans had essentially no firsthand contact with the narratives.[24]

In the early 1900s and 1910s slave narratives started being mentioned again, this time primarily in more critical scholarly works or historical accounts. The first mention of the term "slave narrative" was during this time period in W.E.B Du Bois' essay "The Negro in Literature and Art" published in 1913, almost fifty years after the Civil War.[25] Writing about the literary history of Black people in the United States, Du Bois elevates the voices of writers such as Henry Highland Garnet and J.W.C. Pennington who recorded Black history in their pamphlets. Du Bois notes that in the 1860s "slave narratives multiplied."[26] Though this is one of the first uses of the term "slave narratives", Du Bois positions the narratives as part of the Black literary canon's "regular development."[27] This matter-of-fact delivery shows that while slave narratives

[22] Mitch Kachun "Slave Narratives and Historical Memory" in *The Oxford Handbook of the African American Slave Narrative* (Oxford University Press, 2014), 26.
[23] Ernest, *The Oxford Handbook,* 27.
[24] L.D. Reddick, "Research barriers in the South," *Social Frontier* 4 no. 30 (1937): 85.
[25] W.E.B. Du Bois, "The Negro in Literature and Art," *The Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science* 49 (1913): 235.
[26] Du Bois, "The Negro in Literature and Art," 235.
[27] Ibid, 234.

may have gotten lost in America's public consciousness, they always had a place in Black scholars' understandings of American history and literature.

Another example of the resurfacing of slave narratives is Theodore Parker's review of slave narratives in *The American Scholar* in 1907. Parker was a minister of the Unitarian church and an abolitionist. Foreshadowing scholarly debates in the years to follow, Parker begins his review by hesitating to definitively label the narratives as "literature."[28] Regardless of their literary status, he boldly claims that the only writing which is "wholly indigenous and original" to America are the writings on the "Lives of Fugitive Slaves."[29] He explains that this is because these narratives are the only category of writing that could "be written by none but Americans," demonstrating intrinsically American ideas and values.[30] Specifically, Parker concludes, "... all the original romance of Americans is in [the narratives], not in the white man's novel."[31] He contended that there is something uniquely patriotic, perhaps borne in the revolutionary spirit of early Americans, about slave narratives, something that he believes novels by white men have not been able to emulate. This review makes a passionate plea for the value of these narratives as essential to the American literary canon, accomplishing something he argues white authors cannot.

Parker's positive review marks the ending of a period of favorable analysis and interpretation of slave narratives. In the following decades, one white historian's opinions and ideologies would come to dominate the scholarly study of the Antebellum South. Known by many as the first historian of the American South, Ulrich B. Phillips' books on American slavery express his unwavering stance on slave narratives and race. Specifically, his landmark books

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[28] Theodore Parker, *The American Scholar* (Boston: American Unitarian Association, 1907), 37.
[29] Parker, *The American Scholar,* 37.
[30] Ibid.
[31] Ibid.

American Negro Slavery (1918) and *Life and Labor in the Old South* (1929) diminish and dismiss slave narratives and any value they may have as a source for a historian. Other historians at the time would echo these sentiments, regarding slave narratives with contempt and skepticism.

Phillips believed and repeatedly argued that Black people were innately inferior to white people, a stance that was not uncommon amongst white Southerners at the time.[32] For instance in *American Negro Slavery* (1918), Phillip's comments on the "natural amenability of the blacks" and how they were "by racial qualities submissive rather than defiant… whose very defects invited paternalism rather than repression."[33] His racist views that the "racial qualities" of Black enslaved people both led to and made their enslavement possible foreshadow his opinions on the value and utility of slave narratives in understanding slavery. Phillips and his contemporaries promoted views of slavery that leaned on idealized, misinformed nostalgic interpretations of the "good old" Antebellum South.

Another landmark historian of the time, John Herbert Nelson, similarly argued that Black narrators were racially inferior to white ones, using this as evidence to support his claims that slave narratives were not completely "true" and could not have been produced by Black authors working alone. In his book *The Negro Character in American Literature* (1926), Nelson goes one step further in his criticism of slave narratives to argue that abolitionist involvement in the production of slave narratives led to an unrealistic presentation of the narrator. These flaws, Nelson concludes, relegate slave narratives to the category of "ill-disguised propaganda."[34] Due to the narrator's "inferior" abilities, Nelson asserts that there is no way they could have written

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[32] Sam E. Salem, "U.B. Phillips and the Scientific Tradition," *The Georgia Historical Quarterly* 44, no.2 (1960): 179.
[33] Ulrich B. Phillips, *American Negro Slavery: A Survey of the Supply, Employment and Control of Negro Labor as Determined by the Plantation Regime* (New York: London, D. Appleton and Company, 1918), 454.
[34] John Herbert Nelson, *The Negro Character in American Literature* (Lawrence, Kansas: Department of Journalism Press, 1926), 55.

their narratives. In what ironically comes across as a backhanded compliment, Nelson points out that the verse of slave narratives is "beyond him [the Black narrator]… His diction is poetical, affected; he uses grammar like a scholar; he reasons like a philosopher," feats he believed a Black person could not possibly manage to achieve intellectually.[35] He emphasizes that, due to the impressive literary qualities of slave narratives, these documents must be the product of white abolitionists. Interestingly enough, commentary on the literary value (or lack thereof) and literary categorization of the slave narratives would remain a theme for scholarly debate for decades to come. Publishers at the time proved more apt to publish these white critiques than they were to republish the primary sources themselves.

Other sections of Nelson's book alert readers to what kind of knowledge publishers had made accessible to American historians in the 1920s. For instance, his racist asides on Africa represent the fundamental lack of knowledge most Americans had about the continent and thus about the background of enslaved people in America.[36] Additionally, Nelson evaluates how scholars used slave narratives in Nelson's time as compared to the role they occupied in the past. He notes that in the 1850s, any writing by Black people, regardless of whether they had been enslaved or not, was highly regarded.[37] Yet, as he writes seventy-years later, "many slave autobiographies… all but three or four seem to be forgotten."[38] Here Nelson refers to how slave narratives fell into obscurity after the Civil War, when publishers slowed printing of narratives because of a lack of audience. This also suggests that out of the hundreds of published narratives, only a handful were still remembered and accessible to the public generally in the 1920s.

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[35] Nelson, *The Negro Character*, 55.
[36] Ibid, 57.
[37] Ibid, 61.
[38] Ibid, 60.

Nelson continues on the topic of slave narratives' absence from scholarly conversations and whether those narratives have a purpose in discussions about American slavery. Struggling to reconcile two competing ideas, Nelson seemingly contradicts himself. First, he makes abundantly clear that he believes slave narratives are full of "the most vociferous propaganda" for the anti-slavery cause, crafting accounts that are "untrustworthy" due to the help and influence of abolitionists in the writing of the narrative.[39] Despite his strong, unyielding language, Nelson concedes that these documents are nonetheless valuable records of life in the South, documenting how people "talked, dressed, carried on their occupations" and overall painting a picture of "the world in which they moved."[40] In his view, slave narratives are useful sources in constructing understandings of what life was like in the South during slavery. Due to the narratives' ability to reconstruct life in the Antebellum South, Nelson asserts that, for the historian "[their] need is always for just such illuminating documents."[41] In regards to scholarship, Nelson's final message is that despite the fact that slave narratives are tainted by abolitionist bias, they nonetheless provide valuable insights into life in the Antebellum South, making them useful for historians.

Alain Locke, a Black writer and philosopher who would become known as the "Dean" of the Harlem Renaissance, echoed some of Nelson's sentiments. It is no coincidence that Locke, a black man with a keen interest in Black history and culture, was one of the few intellectuals engaging with slave narratives in his time. Most white scholars did not include slave narratives in their works at this time because the narratives were difficult to find in archives and they were largely unmotivated to look beyond what publishers were making more easily available.

[39] Ibid, 60, 65.
[40] Ibid, 60.
[41] Ibid, 60.

Similar to Nelson, in his essay "The Negro's Contribution to America Art and Literature" (1928), Locke acknowledges the pause in interest or scholarship on slave narratives after the Civil War, also pointing out that Black intellectuals produced significantly fewer works in the Post-Civil War period.[42] Locke likewise condemns the literary quality of the narratives, calling them "admittedly second-rate."[43] In spite of the narratives' literary status, Locke, like Nelson, argues that "no one can deny [the narratives'] representativeness of its historical period," thus advocating for the use of slave narratives in historical work.[44] Locke makes it clear, however, that the narratives offer little beyond historical context, critiquing their "tame, feeble…" moral protests.[45]

In addition to being a product of a specific time period, Locke points out that slave narratives acted as a vessel to bring Black minds "into the mainstream of practical and cultural contacts," offering white Americans insight into lives and perspectives they might not have been exposed to otherwise.[46] Both Nelson and Locke agreed that, regardless of slave narratives' flaws and shortcomings, there was inherent value in the documents, for historical context and otherwise.

Ulrich B. Phillips, however, did not agree. Phillips entirely dismissed slave narratives as useful sources in historical work and recreating understandings of slavery. Known for meticulously researching and collecting data for his books and projects, Phillips claimed to be committed to the ideology that historical work involves the strict recitation of facts about the past, leaving the work of drawing conclusions from his data up to readers.[47] However, in his

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[42] Alain Locke, "The Negro's Contribution to American Art and Literature," *The Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science* 140 (1928): 236, 239.
[43] Locke, "The Negro's Contribution," 238.
[44] Ibid, 238.
[45] Ibid, 238.
[46] Ibid, 238, 239.
[47] Salem, "U.B. Phillips," 172.

monumentally influential book *Life and Labor in the Old South* (1929), Phillips excludes key sources from his database and analysis, including slave narratives.

In *Life and Labor in the Old South*, Phillips explains his rationale for leaving slave narratives out of his research insisting that slave narratives "were issued with so much abolitionist editing that as a class their authenticity is doubtful."[48] That is, because the majority of known slave narratives were published with the assistance of abolitionist editors and publishers, it cannot be confirmed that the narratives truly represent the stories, lives, or perspectives of the enslaved subjects. As such, Phillips argues that because one cannot verify if slave narratives are authentic (real or true accounts), they cannot and should not be used as primary source documents for understanding the Antebellum South and the institution of slavery. Phillips could not find room to acknowledge or honor the potential value or usefulness of slave narratives in his own work, effectively shunning slave narratives as usable primary sources for historical work on American slavery.

Years after Phillips' landmark publications, his aversion to, or more accurately, his "repudiat[ion]" of slave narratives as legitimate sources for historical research came to dominate the mainstream of historical thought.[49] His publications remained at the forefront of historical scholarship on the American South and slavery for years to come. Not until the late 1930s did historians start pushing back against Phillips' philosophy, which had become so ingrained in the common understanding of scholars that it was treated like fact.

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[48] Ulrich B. Phillips, *Life and Labor in the South* (Little, Brown and Company, 1929), 219.
[49] John Sekora, "Black Message/White Envelope: Genre, Authenticity, and Authority in the Antebellum Slave Narrative," *Callaloo,* no. 32 (1987): 482.

Chapter 2: Phillips Discredited, The Neoabolitionist Movement: 1930-1959

In the period from 1930 to the 1950s, other historians began criticizing Phillips' research tactics, disputing his claims to provide an authoritative history of the American South and citing his prejudices as a critical limiting factor of his works. In the meantime, historian Lawrence D. Reddick, critical of the mishandling and disappearance of source materials on the slave experience in the South, proposed and headed what would become the Works Progress Administration's (WPA) Slave Narrative Collection in 1934.[50] Marking the beginning of a renewed interest in firsthand accounts of slavery in the South, Reddick hoped to employ Black workers to conduct and record interviews with formerly enslaved people, resulting in over 2,300 first-person accounts recorded between the years 1936 and 1938.[51] Due to skewed sampling techniques and imperfect interviewing practices, as well as the fact that the interviews went straight to the Library of Congress rather than being published by mainstream publishers, the WPA interviews did not, at that time, rise to the forefront of the study of American slavery. Around the same time, the field of African history was being instituted in the United States, especially as a result of the work and advocacy of Melville J. Herskovits, with his book *The Myth of the Negro Past* (1941). Later, the Black Panther movement would take up Herskovits' book - which demonstrated that African countries were culturally rich, with fully developed societies and communities - as their manifesto.[52]

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[50] "The WPA and the Slave Narrative Collection," Library of Congress, https://www.loc.gov/collections/slave-narratives-from-the-federal-writers-project-1936-to-1938/articles-and-essays/introduction-to-the-wpa-slave-narratives/wpa-and-the-slave-narrative-collection/.

[51] George P. Rawick, "From Sundown to Sunup: The Making of the Black Community" in *The American Slave: A Composite Autobiography* (Westport, Conn.. Greenwood Pub. Co., 1973), xvi.

[52] *Herskovits at the Heart of Blackness*, Llewellyn M. Smith (2010), Online.

It was not until the mid to late 1940s that there was a resurgence of inventive scholarship on the slave narratives beyond critiques of Phillips. Often overlooked, but principally to blame for this phenomenon, were book publishers. Since publishers had slowed publications to almost a halt by the 1930s, slave narratives were increasingly difficult to find, and only scholars who were willing to conduct intensive research in archives were able to use slave narratives in their scholarship. Marion Wilson Starling was one such scholar. She wrote her landmark doctoral dissertation in 1946 on slave narratives, offering one of the most comprehensive studies on the narratives for many years to come. However, Starling was far ahead of her time and, as a result of a lack of publication of, and interest in, slave narratives, she could not find a publisher for her dissertation until about forty years later, in 1981. After the relative drought in the publication of, and interest in, slave narratives in the years of the early Twentieth century, the time between the 1930s and the 1950s primarily saw scholarship on American slavery that pushed back against Phillips and his racist conceptions of the enslaved narrators. In addition, scholars like Starling wrote important studies of slave narratives that would not have notable impacts on the field until their scholarship was rediscovered and republished decades later. This section will explore some of the important scholars and works from this time period.

Historian Herber Aptheker's book *American Negro Slave Revolts* (1937) was among the first notable critiques of U.B. Phillips following his death in 1934. Not entirely critical, Apthker wrestles with Phillip's influence on the field and his shortcomings. Writing about slave revolts and using slave narratives critically for evidence, Aptheker notes that Phillips wrote extensively on the subject and that his writings "... remain the most complete record of this important chapter in American history."[53] Despite his contributions, however, Aptheker cannot overlook that

[53] Herbert Aptheker, "American Negro Slave Revolts." *Science & Society* 1, no. 4 (1937), 512; Charles H. Nichols, "Who Read the Slave Narratives?" *The Phylon Quarterly*, 20, no. 2 (1959): 161.

Phillip's "pretentiously "objective" account is actually a subtle apology for the Southern Bourbons," that is, though Phillip's boasted his objectivity as a historian, to Aptheker, his white Southern apologist biases creep into his research.[54] Though Aptheker holds Phillips' contributions to the field in high regard, he opposes the view that Phillip's research was objective, arguing instead that Phillip's ties to the South biased his analysis. As Phillips' place as the objective authority on the South came under scrutiny, the reassessment of his work ultimately made room for years of scholarly critiques of and questions about the reliability of Phillips' past works.

Later, in 1944, historian Richard Hofstadter similarly took on Phillips, pointing out failures in his research methods, while also calling for a new approach to how histories of the South should be told. In his essay "U.B. Phillips and the Plantation Legend," Hofstadter first calls attention to the idea that "No single writer has been more influential in establishing patterns of belief about the plantation system of the Old South among scholars and teachers…" as Phillips has.[55] Phillips' influence, however, pushed the narrative of the "plantation legend of the Old South," a nostalgic and romanticized interpretation of the antebellum South not based in reality.[56] To support this claim, Hofstadter looks to Phillips' sampling techniques, which "... he gave no thought to…" and instead "his picture of slavery… was drawn from types of plantations that were not at all representative of the common slaveholding unit."[57] In Hofstadter's analysis, Phillips' subjective cherry-picking of plantations for his research facilitated the narrative of the Old South he wanted to construct - one which looked favorably upon slave owners and diminished the hardships faced by and stories told by enslaved people. While Hofstadter

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[54] Aptheker, "American Negro Slave Revolts," 512.
[55] Richard Hofstadter, "U.B. Phillips and The Plantation Legend." *The Journal of Negro History* 29, no. 2 (1944): 109.
[56] Hofstadter, "U.B. Phillips," 109; Charles H. Nichols, "Slave Narratives and the Plantation Legend." *Phylon* 10. No. 3 (1949): 203.
[57] Hoftstadter, "U.B. Phillips," 110.

concludes that Phillips' books "represent a latter-day phase of the pro-slavery argument," he also clarifies that despite criticism, he believes Phillips' "treatment of the Old South is unlikely to be altered in fundamental respects," given Phillips' thorough work.[58]

Though Hofstadter refused to completely discredit Phillips, he offered suggestions for how to approach the Antebellum South without repeating Phillips' mistakes. Hofstadter argues that the study of the Old South must be approached by scholars of various disciplines including cultural anthropology and social psychology. Most importantly, however, these scholars must also recognize that "any history of slavery must be written in large part from the standpoint of the slave…"[59] Given Phillips' previous criticisms of slave narratives and the concomitant reluctance by scholars to utilize them in their histories despite their limitations, Hofstadter's claim that the history of the South should include the perspective of the enslaved people who lived through it is revolutionary for its time. Phillips' fall from the podium of objectivity continued into the late 1940s as books like John Hope Franklin's *From Slavery to Freedom* rethought histories of African Americans and the importance of telling stories from Black perspectives.[60]

It must be emphasized that historians like John Hope Franklin and Herbert Aptheker, for example, used the works of Black historians like W.E.B. Du Bois and Carter Woodson to define their stances on slave narratives. For these Black historians and others, the significance and centrality of slave narratives always remained primary, even if the rest of Americans, aided by the publishing industry, had let the narratives slip from their consciousness.

Rather than directly calling out Phillips, Marion Wilson Starling's landmark doctoral dissertation "The Slave Narrative: Its Place in American History" (1946) asserted new

[58] Ibid, 122.
[59] Ibid, 124.
[60] John Hope Franklin, *From Slavery to Freedom* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1947).

understandings of slave narratives and their role in constructing histories of the antebellum South. Commenting on the influence of publishing practices, Starling notes that narratives written before 1863 were in their time "as plentiful in publishing centers of the United States and England as today's comic book."[61] At the time of her research, however, the narratives are now "ceremoniously put under lock and key as rare Americana" limiting, and at times barring, access to these sources.[62]

Willing to do the work to unlock and uncover the narratives, Starling names and refutes common reasons scholars do not trust slave narratives (such as the abolitionist propaganda argument of Phillips). Ultimately, she concludes, if scholars use and treat slave narratives the way they would any other historical document - using additional sources like court records, church records, and the Federal Writers' Projects (later renamed the Works Progress Administration, or WPA) interviews to corroborate details in the slave narratives - one would be able to discern truths.[63] Even Starling's mention of putting the WPA interviews in conversation with slave narratives was far ahead of its time - there was simply not enough interest in these histories yet for publishers to publish them and for scholars to take on that work at the time. Starling's main conclusions are that slave narratives are historically significant even if the majority are not of impressive literary quality. She contends that neither a lack of literary quality nor arguments about the "untrustworthiness" of slave narratives, provides sufficient reason to diminish the narratives' inimitable value in recreating histories of slavery in America.[64] Starling's analysis would become especially relevant as interest in slave narratives surged from

[61] Starling, "The Slave Narrative," 220.
[62] Ibid.
[63] Ibid, 222.
[64] Ibid, 221.

the 1960s through the 1980s and once Starling's dissertation itself was published for general consumption for the first time in 1981.

In the mid-forties and fifties, historians began dismantling the assumption of racial inferiority/superiority upon which many of Phillips' works rested. In Gunner Myrdal's *An American Dilemma* (1944), he asserts that "[n]o historian of the institution [of slavery in the American South] can be taken seriously any longer unless he begins with the knowledge that there is no valid evidence that the Negro race is innately inferior to the white…"[65] This assertion refers directly to Phillips and his contemporaries from the early 1900s who used racist misconceptions as justification for rejecting the slave narrative from their studies. In Kenneth Stampp's oft-quoted book *The Peculiar Institution* (1956), Stampp expresses the sentiments of Myrdal. He reimagines slavery in the South,"emphasiz[ing] slave resistance rather than docility" thus pushing back against ideas that slavery was made possible due to the "racial" characteristics of enslaved people.[66]

The reversal of this racial assumption marks the beginning of shifts regarding presuppositions about slavery. Accompanying this change was the "neoabolitionist" movement starting in the 1950s. Neoabolitionism argued that enslaved peoples' perspectives were important to understanding slavery and that the involvement of abolitionists in writing slave narratives should not be taken as evidence that slave narratives are "propaganda." Of increasing importance to scholars at that time were the glances into the minds and personalities of the enslaved person that slave narratives facilitated. These ideological changes coinciding with the beginning of the Civil Rights movement presaged the inspired scholarship of the 1960s (and beyond).

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[65] Peter Novick, *That Noble Dream* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988), 352.
[66] Ibid, 480.

A product of the neoabolitionist movement, Charles H. Nichols' essay "Who Read the Slave Narratives?" (1959) challenged Phillips' defense of slavery but struggled to decide where slave narratives fit in telling these histories. Charles H. Nichols' "Who Read the Slave Narratives?" (1959) examines the treatment of slave narratives at the time they were published. Nichols begins by reasoning why slave narratives are worth paying attention to. He comes up with three reasons, "their wide circulation," "their picture of slavery as seen by its victims," and "their revelation of the mind and personality of the enslaved."[67] Nichols' first point, that slave narratives were widely circulated, speaks to the reach of slave narratives, made possible by publishers who capitalized on audiences' interest in the genre. Nichols emphasizes the popularity of slave narratives, noticing that "it is doubtful whether the present-day public [in 1959] is as interested in reading Negro writing as were mid-nineteenth Americans."[68] This claim simultaneously reflects the environment in which Nichols is writing - one in which white American readers are not centrally concerned with hearing from Black people - which will shift as the Civil Rights Movement picks up steam in the 1960s.

Nichols' final two points highlight the primary motivations for subsequent studies of slave narratives, the first being that slave narratives provide pictures of slavery, helping scholars understand the system of slavery on a personal, day-to-day level from those who experienced it firsthand. The second point, which sets slave narratives apart from first-hand accounts of slavery by slave owners, is that slave narratives provide insight into the enslaved person's mind. Told from the narrator's perspective, slave narratives allow readers to see the authors as people with personalities, as well as give a look into the narrator's mind and how they think and what they think and believe.

[67] Nichols, "Who Read the Slave Narratives?," 149.
[68] Nichols, "Who Read the Slave Narratives?," 151.

Echoing previous historians, Nichols cannot seem to decide on a singular treatment of slave narratives. He issues a staunch critique of historians like U.B. Phillips who "were determined to carry forward the opinion of the Negro-hating propagandists… [giving] rein to the biases of their pro-slavery forebears."[69] To these historians who largely ignored slave narratives as primary source evidence on the character of slavery, Nichols writes that, while slave narratives do not paint a complete picture of slavery, to ignore "such vital data," much of which has been authenticated, "is to present only part of the truth about the peculiar institution."[70] In Nichols' logic, one cannot tell the "truth" or reliably recreate understandings of slavery without including the enslaved person's perspective as found in slave narratives.

At the same time, Nichols further adds to the discourse that slave narratives are not literature by noting that, despite their importance as outlined in his three points, slave narratives "lacked any significant literary quality" whatsoever.[71] Almost a century after reviews by Reverend Ephraim Peabody and Theodore Parker, historians like Nichols agree that slave narratives are useful in helping scholars understand slavery, but concede that they cannot stand alone as literature in their own right.

Though the 1930s through 1950s were not characterized by groundbreaking scholarship on slave narratives (or none which was appreciated or accepted at the time), shifting ideologies like neoabolitionism and the rise of the Civil Rights movement point to a new era of analysis on the horizon.

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[69] Ibid, 159

[70] Ibid, 161.

[71] Ibid, 151.

Chapter 3: Revisionist Histories, Reconsidering the Slave Narrative: 1960s-1980s

Part 1: The Publishing Boom: 1960s

A convergence of factors led to the "boom" in Black history and a renewed interest in slave narratives in the United States that took off in the 1960s.[72] The Civil Rights movement, Black Power movement, and Black Studies movement all flourished in America beginning in the 1960s and continuing through the 1980s, an era sometimes referred to as the Second Reconstruction.[73] With these movements came the understanding among scholars that the African-American experience was not just essential to American history more broadly, but that it was "recoverable;" that is, it is able to be pieced back together to form a comprehensive understanding of African American history.[74] Influenced significantly by the neoabolitionist movement beginning in the fifties, historian Martin Duberman notes that it was "impossible to find any young scholars who took the traditional view of abolitionists as "meddlesome fanatics,"" signaling the dawn of a new generation of scholars and scholarship by the 1960s.[75] Starting with a consensus that slave narratives should not be understood and dismissed merely as abolitionist propaganda subsequently opened space for scholars to conduct pioneering analyses of slave narratives over the course of the following two decades.

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[72] Peter H. Wood, "'I Did the Best I Could for My Day': The Study of Early Black History during the Second Reconstruction, 1960 to 1976." *The William and Mary Quarterly* 35, no 2. (1978): 190.
[73] Wood, "I Did the Best I Could for My Day'," 188.
[74] Ibid, 190.
[75] Novick, *That Noble Dream*, 351.

Before this revolutionary scholarship "boom," slave narratives were largely left out of research on American slavery, occasionally being used as primary sources by historians to reconstruct understandings of slavery in America but frequently dismissed as inaccurate and even inauthentic. According to American historian John W. Blassingame, a leader in the study of slavery in the United States, "Only three of sixteen state studies of plantation slavery published between 1902 and 1972 drew even moderately on slave testimony," like slave narrative or WPA interviews, for example.[76] The omission of enslaved person's perspectives in state-sponsored scholarship on slavery highlights and reflects the general trend of leaving out enslaved people's perspectives when researching American slavery, a trend reflected in and magnified by decisions made by the publishing industry.

Although the role of the political and racial forces in shaping studies of slavery is well-established, another less well-studied factor in the nascent interest in these primary sources during that time period is the role of publishers in controlling the renewed availability of slave narratives. Historians and scholars in the 40s and 50s who initiated the second wave of critical scholarship on the Antebellum South and American slavery struggled to find copies of slave narratives. These "long-lost books" fell into obscurity when publishers halted the printing of slave narratives after the Civil War.[77] In the postbellum period, publishers noticed that slave narratives were no longer "generat[ing] comparable sales" and subsequently stopped printing them.[78] In fact, during the twentieth century, despite being "the most well-known and widely read antebellum slave narrative," *The Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass* was not printed again until 1960."[79] When the Brown v. Board of Education Supreme Court case was decided in

[76] John W. Blassingame, "Using the Testimony of Ex-Slaves: Approaches and Problems" in *The Slave's Narrative* (Oxford University Press, 1985), 79.
[77] Michaël Roy, "The Slave Narrative Unbound" in *Against A Sharp White Background* (University of Wisconsin Press, 2019), 260.
[78] Kachun, *The Oxford Handbook*, 26.
[79] Kachun, *The Oxford Handbook*, 30.

1954 - a decisive event that presaged the revolt against racial inequality that led to the Civil Rights movement - only one slave narrative was currently in print.[80] The omission of slave narratives and other enslaved people's testimonies in American studies of slavery can be traced, in large part, to the lack of slave narrative copies in circulation. It was not until the 1960s when publishers began printing modern editions of slave narratives that slave narratives saw a resurgence in the public's consciousness and a resurgence in scholarship in a variety of original ways.[81]

Perhaps motivated by the desire to tap into the zeitgeist to make a profit, publishers hastily reprinted slave narratives in the 1960s with little editing, failing to acknowledge the "various stages" the texts went through or the author's intentions or agenda in writing them.[82] Despite some lapses in publishing quality, the decision to put slave narratives back into print sparked a formative era of scholarship on American slavery, American and African history, American literature, and more, which relied intrinsically on American slave narratives. Additionally, amidst this publishing boom, many editions of slave narratives were "geared explicitly toward secondary and post-secondary educational audiences," suggesting that publishers had academics in mind when anticipating their readership.[83] When compared to the initial publication of slave narratives, which found popularity and widespread audiences due to their compelling content and riveting stories, it is notable that almost 100 years later, the narratives were primarily viewed instead as objects of scholarly interest.

Importantly, this resurgence of publishing slave narratives did not happen in a vacuum. The context of the Second Reconstruction, wherein issues of race and African-American history

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[80] Bontemps, "The Slave Narrative," vii.
[81] Michaël Roy, *Fugitive Texts* (UW Press 2022), 5.
[82] Leon Jackson, "The Talking Book and the Talking Book Historian: African American Cultures of Print – The State of the Discipline," *Book History* 13 (2010): 5.
[83] Kachun, "Slave Narratives and Historical Memory," 30.

were at the forefront of social and political discourse, opened an avenue for publishers to capitalize on (and profit from) the pulse of the time. The late 1960s saw an increase in Black historians (historians who were Black but also committed to cultural nationalism in some form) and professors in the discipline.[84] This new generation of professionals "aggressively challenged the claims of any whites to speak authoritatively on *their* past" thus introducing a wave of scholars with personal stakes and claims in the study of Black histories in America, including slave narratives.[85]

One cannot be certain whether publishers were reacting to what people would find important given the mood of the time by reprinting the narratives, or whether publishers' efforts then spurred or influenced what people found to be important (by increasing access to the narratives). In either case, publishers took advantage of the moment by playing into a cultural feedback loop that ultimately worked in their favor.

The "rediscovery" of slave narratives from the 1960s through the 1980s also coincided with an additional component to the Second Reconstruction: an upsurge of interest in the African continent, including African cultures and histories. Precipitated by a handful of influential studies, a newfound interest in Africa resulted in the development of African Studies, and later Black/African American Studies departments across American educational institutions. Altogether, the events of the Second Reconstruction set the cultural and intellectual scene for the "boom" of scholarship that posited novel interpretations of the slave narratives, American slavery and American history, and their influence on American literature. It also acknowledged the gap in scholarship generated prior to the 1960s, focusing on the impacts of previous disregard for slave narratives on current understandings of American and American history. Ultimately,

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[84] Novick, *That Noble Dream*, 470.
[85] Novick, *That Noble Dream,* 476.

this important period of scholarship was rooted in a change of publishing practices. As publishers made slave narratives widely available and accessible by putting many back into print, new scholars and scholarly fields employed them to their fullest extent to reach new conclusions.

In the section that follows, I will analyze a selection of the most noteworthy scholars and works that were produced after the publishing boom of the 1960s through the late 1980s. These sources demonstrate the breadth and diversity of original thought on and use of slave narratives in scholarship during this time, a development largely made possible by growth in the publication of and access to slave narratives, WPA interviews, and other first-hand accounts of slavery.

Arna Bontemps, a notable poet and novelist of the Harlem Renaissance, committed most of his professional life to "locating, preserving, editing, and publicizing" slave narratives that otherwise would have gone unpublished.[86] His book, *The Slave Narrative: An American Genre* (1969) examined the trajectory of slave narratives' position in public consciousness and in activism. As the title indicates, Bontemps claims that slave narratives significantly contributed to "American cultural history of the nineteenth century," but had since dwindled in relevance in the public's consciousness.[87] Here, Bontemps attributes the decrease in interest in slave narratives directly to publishing practices. When slave narratives ceased to be published/republished and it became more difficult for scholars and the general public to access them, they ceased to be foundational to the public's and scholars' understanding of the slave experience. Pointing to the staying power of slave narratives, he further explains that once students of the day are introduced to slave narratives, they will be struck and moved by the narratives in the same way they are by contemporary autobiographies of Civil Rights activists like Malcolm X.[88]

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[86] Sekora, "Black Message/White Envelope," 483.
[87] Bontemps, "The Slave Narrative: An American Genre," vii.
[88] Ibid, xvii.

Implied in this observation is that contemporary audiences find slave narratives to be as relevant and gripping as they were when published a century earlier - now that they have access to them. Here Bontemps also nods at the continuities between the current generation of Black activists and enslaved people in the antebellum time period in their use of narrative/autobiography to convey important political and social messages.

Bontemps asserts that the value of slave narratives extends beyond their interest as primary sources describing the slave experience. He notes that as a literary body of work, these narratives shaped and influenced the writing of contemporary Black American writers like William Wells Brown, W.E.B Du Bois, and James Baldwin, among others.[89] Bontemps is among the first scholars to highlight that slave narratives established the beginning of a new literary tradition. This literary tradition influenced future African American literature as well as the writing of some of the most notable twentieth-century American authors. Though not settling the long-withstanding debate on the literary quality of slave narratives, Bontemps argues that these famous writers "reveal in their writing a debt to the narratives" whether intentional or not.[90] In this way, slave narratives can no longer be thought of as an isolated body of writing, but instead connected to literary traditions far beyond their genre and related works. Bontemps doubles down on the literary influence of slave narratives by expanding his idea beyond Black writers. He suggests that it may be too early to tell, but slave narratives appear to be influential on "American writing, if not indeed on America's view of itself."[91] The works of American writers like Mark Twain and Herman Melville, among others, have been notably influenced by slave narratives. Slave narratives have thus changed the way Americans write and the way people understand America.

[89] Ibid, x.
[90] Ibid, x.
[91] Ibid. xviii.

Bontemps also meditates on the social and political use of slave narratives by Black Americans. One example of a slave narrative being used to further social movements that emphasizes the role of publishers and books is the treatment of *The Interesting Narrative of the Life of Olaudah Equiano, or Gustavus Vass, the African* (1789) over time. During the Harlem Renaissance, bibliophiles, those with specialized interests in books, would discuss *The Interesting Narrative of the Life of Olaudah Equiano* as "one of the most important books attributed to American [Black] authorship."[92] Bontemps remarks that Equiano's impressive narrative was a source of pride for Black Americans and is frequently brought up "every time a black resurgence occurs."[93] These anecdotes complicate the general understanding that slave narratives fell into total obscurity during the twentieth century due to lapses in publication. Not all slave narratives were "lost" to time because they went out of print. Black scholars and activists who had copies were careful to hold on to them, recognizing their importance and power long before the rest of America did. Bontemps highlights the infrequently credited history of slave narratives being used for political and social causes by Black Americans.

Bontemps gestures at a larger history of Black bibliophily that can be traced back to the late nineteenth century. One early book collector, John Wesley Cromwell Sr., started the Negro Book Collectors Exchange that sought to create a bibliography of every text written by a Black author.[94] As Bontemps describes, book collecting was "driven by a powerfully activist sentiment," that is, the books collected were used as evidence to "counter the pseudo-scientific racism" of the time.[95] Other political aims included collecting books that demonstrated Africa's role in world history or "African American authors' contribution to their nation's culture."[96] In

[92] Ibid, xiv.
[93] Ibid, xiv.
[94] Leon Jackson, "The Talking Book and the Talking Book Historian: African American Cultures of Print – The State of the Discipline", *Book History* 13 (2010): 288, 289.
[95] Jackson, "The Talking Book," 289.
[96] Ibid.

this tradition of book collecting to ensure records of Black voices throughout history, the slave narrative never truly disappeared for Black bibliophiles and intellectual communities. However, the limited nature of their publication had the practical effect of limiting their access to only those most dedicated to discovering and using them.

Inspired to "remake" their past by gaining a fuller picture of their past, Black Americans of multiple generations continued to work within their own communities to prevent histories from getting completely erased by the (white) mainstream, even during times of publication drought. Arturo A. Schomburg's argument during the Harlem Renaissance that Black Americans must "remake [their] past before [they] can begin to make [their] future" drove renewed interest in slave narratives at that time.[97] In the 1960's, this interest grew more widespread as sources like slave narratives and the WPA interviews, as well as studies of African culture and history played an instrumental role in the reconsideration of Black history. For instance, the Black Panther Party (1966-1982) took up Melville J. Herskovits' book *The Myth of the Negro Past* (1941) as their manifesto. *The Myth of the Negro Past* argued that Black people came from complex, culturally vibrant African communities and both retained and adapted such traditions during enslavement in America.[98] The Black Panther party pointed to Herskovits to argue that, Black people in America had distinct histories, pasts, and culture - facts that had long been denied and stripped away by white people. Facilitating these understandings, were the expansion of the field of African Studies and the development of African Studies/Black studies departments.

Scholarship in the 1960s was influenced by a multitude of cultural and intellectual factors, such as the Civil Rights movement and developing understandings about Africa. However, primarily driving the scholarship of the decade and those that followed was the

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[97] Arturo Schomburg, "The Negro Digs Up His Past," *Survey Graphic*, March 1, 1925, 670.
[98] Herskovits, *The Myth of the Negro Past*.

republishing of slave narratives which placed the narratives back into America's public consciousness. Though the value of slave narratives had never been lost to Black intellectual and book-collecting communities, only once slave narratives were readily accessible did slave narratives regain attention in mainstream scholarly discourse.

Part 2: The WPA Interviews Re-Evaluated: 1970s

Though the period from the 1960s through the 1980s as a whole represented a time of flourishing scholarship on slave narratives, certain distinct trends can be discerned in distinct time periods during this era. Broken down further, the 1970s saw a new scholarly trend come to the fore - the push to consider the WPA interviews of formerly enslaved Americans conducted in the 1920s/30s.[99]

In a parallel publishing history to that of slave narratives, it was not until the WPA interview collection was published in 1972 that scholars began to analyze the interviews deeply in their work. However, the non-use of WPA interviews leading up to 1972 is more complicated than issues of access. Even before the interviews were published, prominent American historian C. Vann Woodward argued that "The existence of the material was widely known, and its comparative inaccessibility is not very helpful as an explanation of its neglect."[100] Woodward points out that even during the neo-abolitionist movement of the 1950s wherein enslaved people's perspectives were considered as important as those of slave owners in understanding American slavery, the WPA interviews were still being used less than rarer archive materials.[101]

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[99] Donna J. Spindel, "Assessing Memory: Twentieth-Century Slave Narratives Reconsidered." *The Journal of Interdisciplinary History* 27, no. 2 (1996): 247.
[100] C. Vann Woodward, "History from Slave Sources" review of *The American Slave: A Composite Autobiography* by George P. Rawick, *The American Historical Review* 79, no. 2 (1974): 471.
[101] Woodward, "History from Slave Sources," 471

Principally to blame for the interviews' neglect, argues Woodward, was "a prevailing suspicion of the authenticity and quality of the material itself."[102] Interestingly enough, based on the decades of scholarship about slave narratives already covered, authenticity and quality seem to be the two recurring concerns when it comes to reluctance to rely on the testimonies from (formerly) enslaved peoples.

Understanding the character of scholarship on the WPA interviews in the 1970s can offer insights into the changes occurring in the study of American slavery. In "History from Slave Sources" (1974), a review of George P. Rawick's *The American Slave: A Composite Autobiography* by C. Vann Woodward, Woodward relays his own list of grievances with the WPA interviews. He emphasizes that there is "evidence of skewed sampling of several kinds" when it came to conducting the interviews.[103] For instance, certain states were disproportionately represented in the interviews, and the population demographics of the interviewees did not constitute a representative sample. Additionally, the older ages of interviewees raise apprehensions - "about two-thirds were eighty or more, and fifteen percent were over ninety-three…"[104] Older age raises obvious concerns about the quality of memory. Furthermore, interviewees were of various ages at the time of emancipation, meaning some had been enslaved for upwards of fifty years, while others were barely one before they were freed.[105] These discrepancies will result in vastly different recollections of slavery.

Most seriously of all, Woodward points out that interviews were skewed by the interviewers themselves - "their biases, procedures, and methods."[106] A majority of interviewers were Southern whites during the time of Jim Crow, white supremacy, lynchings, and

[102] Ibid.
[103] Ibid, 472.
[104] Ibid.
[105] Ibid.
[106] Ibid, 473.

segregation.[107] American historian John W. Blassingame expressed similar concerns with the WPA interviews in his essay "Using the Testimony of Ex-Slaves: Approaches and Problems" (1975). He dives further into the context in which the interviews were conducted. Specifically, Blassingame points out that many formerly enslaved people lived in the same area as their masters' descendants and "were dependent on whites to help them obtain their old-age pensions…"[108] These close relations and dependencies confined interviewees to being conscious of their responses and how it might impact their current situations. Furthermore, Woodward describes that "In that climate of race relations, the white interrogators customarily adopted a patronizing or, at best, paternalistic tone and at worst an offensive condescension.[109] Under such biased circumstances, it is fair to assume that the results of the interviews may have been distorted.

Despite all the shortcomings of the interviews, Woodward enthusiastically argues that these do not justify historians' discarding the interviews. If historians are to throw away the interviews as sources due to their biases and distortion, Woodward implores them to "be consistent and discard most of the other sources they habitually use…" most of which are full of their own contradictions, lies, fabrications, and exaggerations.[110] As Woodward noted, there is no excuse for historians to ignore the WPA interviews when historians must always work with imperfect sources. Woodward continues, noting that all historical sources have their "peculiarities" but it is up to the historian to make sense of them regardless.[111] Slave narratives and the WPA interviews should not be tossed aside because of their shortcomings, he argues, but instead they should be read critically and in context, like any other historical source. To

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[107] Ibid.
[108] Blassingame, "Using the Testimony of Ex-Slaves," 85.
[109] Woodward, "History from Slave Sources," 473.
[110] Ibid, 475.
[111] Ibid.

underscore this point, Woodward emphasizes that while the interviews need to be "used with caution and discrimination," they must still be considered.[112]

Both Blassingame and Woodward agree that the WPA interviews are still useful in learning about certain aspects of slavery. For instance, Woodward makes the case that the interviews are useful in that they reveal insights into the social history of the antebellum period, disrupting the myth that all whites in the South were equal.[113] Blassingame acknowledges that both the narratives and the WPA interviews are flawed in some ways but concludes that the narrative has advantages over the interviews. For instance, the longer form of the narrative allows for deeper insight into the narrator's personality.[114] Ultimately, Blassingame urges scholars to study the testimonies of both Black and white people since neither group had a monopoly on the truth.[115]

Once again publishers and publication of the WPA interviews in particular may have tipped the balance in favor of their use by scholars and academics. American historian George P. Rawick was influential in facilitating the rise of scholarship based on the WPA interviews by stitching together transcriptions of the interviews. By 1979, Rawick had compiled and published forty-one volumes of transcribed interviews in *The American Slave: A Composite Autobiography*.[116] His introductory volume titled *From Sundown to Sunup: The Making of the Black Community* (1972) adds dimension to the ways enslaved people's testimony can be used to understand both the "institution of slavery and the lives of the enslaved."[117] While his primary focus is on the WPA interview collection, the conclusions made in his introductory volume apply widely to the treatment of enslaved people's testimonies like slave narratives in the study of

[112] Ibid, 480.
[113] Ibid, 479.
[114] Blassingame, "Using the Testimony of Ex-Slaves," 92.
[115] Blassingame, "Using the Testimony of Ex-Slaves," 94.
[116] Kachun, *The Oxford Handbook*, 30.
[117] Kachun, *The Oxford Handbook*, 31.

American slavery. Shifting attention back to the changes in the discipline in the 1970s, Rawick comments on the stereotypes/misconceptions about enslaved people that led to the erasure of Black history from the canon of American history.

While other scholars have commented on the "American-ness" of slave narratives, another area of inquiry in Rawick's work focuses on how enslaved people themselves have been perceived. Rawick discusses how in the course of American history, the Black slave has typically been portrayed as "the victim who never enters his own history" and is instead an object upon which external forces act.[118] Under such assumptions, it has been possible for historians to claim three things: enslaved people left no records, enslaved people did not accomplish anything "noteworthy", and therefore, enslaved people "did not have much of a history."[119] Historians who have employed this kind of thinking, which fails to legitimately consider the life/experience of enslaved people, thereby invalidating the experience of the enslaved person, could then justify the decision to not employ sources from an enslaved person's perspective (like slave narratives or the WPA interviews) in their research.

Furthermore, Rawick explains that the study of the history of Black Americans has often been relegated to a closed-off category, one that is "specialized, exotic" and therefore separate from American history more generally.[120] By keeping Black history separate from studies of American history, it has been possible (though extremely pernicious) to see Black people in America as distinct from "Americans" and leave Black histories out of how American histories are told. As one way to combat these misconceptions that had long dominated the discipline of American history, Rawick proposes paying close attention to the "continuity between slavery and

[118] Rawick, *From Sundown to Sunup*, xiv.
[119] Rawick, *From Sundown to Sunup*, xiv.
[120] Ibid.

freedom" that can help make sense of the system of American racism.[121] In demonstrating that Black slavery in America was not a distinct, static event with a beginning and an end and that its effects permeate America systemically, Rawick confirms that the history of Black people in America is intrinsically American history. This perspective is noteworthy as its core thesis about the continuities of slavery will set up future understandings of racism in America, including new frameworks to use to understand contemporary America.[122]

With the newfound accessibility of slave narratives, scholars of the 1970s looked back to the under-studied WPA narratives as yet another source about American slavery. By putting the two narratives in conversation with one another, a change largely made possible by the compilation and publication of slave narratives and the WPA interviews, scholars gained important insights into the character of American slavery and the enslaved person's experience.

Part 3: Form Over Content, The Autobiography Question: 1980s

The 1980s experienced one of the most dramatic shifts in how scholars approached slave narratives. It can be argued that after decades of compelling, intensive discourse on the narratives, scholars had come to some consensus about the inherent value of slave narratives, thereby freeing up time and intellectual space to consider alternative means by which to analyze them. One scholar defines the scholarly shift on slave narratives in the 1980s as one from "content to form; from functionalism to aestheticism; from mimesis to reflexivity; and from historicism to theory."[123] That is, more than what the slave narratives said, scholars turned their

[121] Ibid, xviii.
[122] Christina Sharpe, *In the Wake: On Blackness and Being* (Duke University Press, 2016).
[123] Leon Jackson, "The Talking Book and the Talking Book Historian: African American Cultures of Print – The State of the Discipline," *Book History* 13 (2010): 256.

focus to the literary form of the slave narrative itself, reviewing them not just as historical sources but as a unique and foundational literary genre. Of course, such a shift was only possible because the narratives had been published and anthologized, an act which encouraged their treatment not just as historical but as literary artifacts.

Prior to the 1980s, as has been discussed, a majority of the scholarship on slave narratives dealt with the content of the narratives, concerned specifically with what historians can ascertain about day-to-day life, social relations, the personalities of the narrator, and certain historical events. In the 1980s, however, scholarship largely turned to questions about what kind of literary form slave narratives were, engaging significantly with theory on genre, rhetorical strategy, and whether slave narratives can be classified as autobiography. These questions and debates opened additional avenues for understanding slave narratives and their place/ role in the study of American slavery and American literary history. As a result, the 1980s also represent a time of abundant diversity of thought on slave narratives.

It is probably not a coincidence that Marion Wilson Starling's 1946 dissertation *The Slave Narrative: Its Place in American History* was published in 1981. Given that almost forty years passed before Starling could find a willing publisher, it is clear that the 1980s represented a moment marked by renewed curiosity in slave narratives and a burgeoning market for works on the subject. Although Starling's work influenced decades of scholars even before its publication, its contributions were magnified after publication.[124]

In the book *Witnessing Slavery: The Development of Ante-bellum Slave Narratives*, author Frances Smith Foster (1979) weighs in on the slave narrative as a genre, literary tradition, and archetype for African-American autobiography by considering the factors that influenced the

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[124] John W. Blassingame and Charles T. Davis, editor's preface to *The Slave Narrative: Its Place in American History* by Marion Wilson Starling (G.K. Hall and Co., 1981), x.

creation of slave narratives. Likely also influenced by the growing trend of feminist scholarship, Foster's book is just one instance of looking at slave narratives from a literary perspective, a greater trend of the 1980s. Slave narratives, according to Foster, were included by "the myths and coping strategies that were perpetuated by the oral traditions of their culture."[125] Without discounting the incredible volume of scholarship on the impact of abolitionist editing on the narratives, Foster points to another influence, the narrator's cultural relationship to the art of storytelling through oral tradition. Understanding the literary choices made in slave narratives, in this conception of the writing process, requires an acknowledgment of the traditions that influenced the genre, and the demands and expectations of publishers and readers who were consuming them. It should be noted that this type of close reading and literary criticism was facilitated by the republication of slave narratives in anthologies and other collections.

In addition to cultural history, Foster argues that the literary quality of the narratives can be attributed to the narratives' intended audience. Generally, it can be argued that the motivation behind writing slave narratives was to inform white readers about the realities of slavery (in order to help the abolition cause). As such, slave narratives hoped to reach the widest possible group of readers. For these reasons, Foster asserts that while some narratives rank among the best literature, "slave narratives were not created for a limited audience of refined and cultivated sensibilities," they sought to be read by as many people as possible.[126] While many scholars have dismissed or diminished the importance of slave narratives on the basis of their literary quality, Foster reframes this thinking entirely. Slave narratives, in her opinion, never tried to be literary masterpieces - their main function was to communicate ideas about slavery to as many people as possible. As a result, narrators did not have to accommodate "sophisticated" audiences or

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[125] Foster, *Witnessing Slavery,* 57.
[126] Ibid, 3.

scholars, they wrote to the people who were most likely to read them, average white Americans. Foster's perspective on this turns decades of scholarship on their heads. Her analysis begs the question of whether the literary quality really matters to scholarship on slave narratives.

Moreover, as Foster notes, narrators had countless hoops to jump over and through during the creation and publication process. For instance, in attempting to reach the public widely, narrators had to "communicate with an audience with which they did not share cultural or moral concerns… without raising suspicions that they were advocating social equality or seriously challenging theories of racial superiority."[127] Not only were narrators writing to an audience with serious ideological differences, they also had to proceed cautiously, careful to not imply ideas on race or equality that would alienate white readers. At the same time, narrators wanted to relay their ideas and opinions. In these ways, narrators could not write with complete freedom or autonomy - over content or form. Social impositions influenced what narrators were able to do with their narratives and, keeping these two tensions in mind, such limiting factors understandably impacted the literary "quality" of the narratives.

Regardless of their literary quality, by the second-wave of narratives, Fosters believes narrators, "skilled or unskilled as artists," were aware that they were taking part in a literary tradition.[128] The "slave narrative" tradition of writing manifested in narrative patterns that were reflected in both content, tropes, and rhetorical techniques employed.

Other scholars took a different approach, emphasizing that the formation of a followed "tradition" in the second-wave of slave narratives, as seen through repeated elements across narratives, was evidence that the narratives are not authentic or literarily insignificant. Take the example of English professor James Olney. In the 1980s, Olney was working to turn

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[127] Ibid, 3, 4.
[128] Ibid, 58.

autobiography studies into a "coherent field" and a "legitimate object of literary study." Dedicating his studies to autobiography, Olney, as an expert, conducted a comprehensive examination of slave narratives' status. In "I Was Born" Slave Narratives, Their Status as Autobiography and as Literature (1984), he describes that in an autobiography, the writer recalls their life in a way that shows how the past brought them to where they are today. The narration moves the story forward while memory looks backward, "[creating] the *significance* of events in discovering the pattern into which those events fall."[129] As a result of these complex interactions between past, present, and retrospection, events are "re-situated not in mere chronological sequence but in patterned significance."[130] Therefore, the narrator is a "creative and active shaper" of their narrative, recalling the past from the present perspective.[131]

Olney compiles a list of elements that he sees as present in all slave narratives. From this he concludes that among the narratives there is a "sense not of uniqueness but of overwhelming *sameness*…" and that as a result, slave narratives "[tend] to exhibit a highly conventional, rigidly fixed form" that is like the "painting by numbers" of a creative act.[132] Cutting and blunt, Olney repeatedly emphasizes his contention that slave narratives are of poor literary quality due to these repeating narrative elements which stifle any room for artistic creativity. The goals of the slave narrative complicate the dynamic relationships with time in autobiography, argues Olney. Since the narrative seeks to "give a picture of "slavery *as it is*"" the narrator must claim that they are not "performing any act of *poiesis*" that is shaping or creating in their narratives.[133] In fact, since the rhetorical intentions of the slave narrators rely on the premise that these stories are true, epitomizations of slavery, as "an institution and an external reality," narrators must be careful to

[129] Ibid, 149.
[130] Ibid.
[131] Ibid.
[132] James Olney, "I Was Born" Slave Narratives, Their Status as Autobiography and as Literature" in *The Slave's Narrative* (Oxford University Press, 1985), 148, 150.
[133] Ibid, 150.

prove that there is “nothing doubtful or mysterious about memory” so that readers believe their accounts.[134] Attempting to portray slavery as an “objective reality,” in this way, removes the creative shaping that is inherent in the definition of autobiography.[135]

Furthermore, Olney interprets the purpose of the slave narrative (“to reveal the truth of slavery and so to bring about its abolition”) as evidence that the narratives were not created for themselves, for their “own intrinsic, unique interest.”[136] If this is the case, the details of the individual narrator themselves, their personality, perspectives, life events, hold less weight than broader depictions of slavery and its inner workings. This reframing effectively dismantles longstanding objections to using slave narratives in scholarship due to their questionable veracity. Rather than being concerned with whether every detail of the narrator’s life was real and recounted exactly, scholars might benefit from thinking from the writer’s perspective, wherein descriptions of slavery generally were more important than individual detail in the overall abolitionist cause.

Olney concludes that slave narratives cannot fit into the technical “autobiography" category. He also notes that the only narrative of “genuine appeal… or real claim to literary merit” is Fredrick Douglass.[137] While neither autobiography nor literature, the value of slave narratives, he asserts, lies in the connection to the African-American literary tradition, wherein elements of slave narratives are apparent in both content and form.[138]

Foster and Olney were both concerned with the form of the narratives rather than the details within. Unlike Foster though, Olney and certain other contemporary scholars of the 1980s were chiefly concerned with the classification of slave narrative, intently focused on determining

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[134] Ibid, 154, 151.
[135] Ibid, 154.
[136] Ibid.
[137] Ibid, 167.
[138] Ibid, 168.

whether the narratives qualified as autobiography, literature, or perhaps something unique unto themselves. By contrast, Foster sees such elements as evidence of a genre being created. Following a form and leaning into a tradition is how literary genres are developed, Foster posits. In this context, Foster contends that literary quality is of little to no importance. Instead, it is more notable that slave narratives became the "archetype for Afro-American autobiography," whereby the common themes of slave narratives drove the creation of future Black literary forms/traditions.[139] Olney agrees to this point, asserting that it is an "undeniable fact" that the African American literary tradition "as we know it now" is derived from slave narratives.[140]

Responding to many of Olney's claims two years later, English professor William L. Andrews describes his stance on slave narratives as genre and/or autobiography in his book *To Tell A Free Story* (1986). Andrews is less concerned with whether slave narratives conform to a strict and theoretical definition of autobiography, employing the term loosely to refer to slave narratives. He begins by pointing out that no group of American autobiographers has been met with more "skepticism and resistance than the ex-slave."[141] For reasons already detailed and the more immediately obvious issue of racism in America, Andrews points out that no other category of autobiography has faced as much doubt and contention as the slave narrative has. Such controversy also speaks to the reason why slave narratives have endured as an object of study over almost two centuries of scholarship.

One aspect of slave narratives that repeatedly raises issues is that some aspects of the narratives were fictionalized. Dialogue is a primary example of fictional elements in the narratives. Andrews offers an alternative framework to Olney's for making sense of the fictional

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[139] Foster, *Witnessing Slavery,* 57.
[140] Olney, "I Was Born," 168, 170.
[141] William L. Andrews, *To Tell a Free Story: The First Century of Afro-American Autobiography, 1760-1865* (University of Illinois Press, 1986), 3.

elements in Black autobiography. Olney's analysis suggested that the choices of the narrator always come back to their intention of recreating an "objective" view of slavery. Therefore, inconsistencies and falsehoods are not worth obsessing over since the general depiction of slavery is what narrators hoped readers would ascertain. Similarly, Andrews writes that narrators were aware that the public did not read their narratives to find out more about the narrative as a person, they read more to "get a firsthand look at the institution of slavery than to become acquainted with an individual slave."[142] Holding this as truth, Andrews argues that one should still not ignore the rhetorical strategies narrators used throughout their writing.

Specifically, Andrews contends that the fictive elements of the narrative should be viewed as part of a "rhetorical and aesthetic strategy" rather than evidence of moral failures or abolitionist influences.[143] Here Andrews is naming something few scholars have - that narrators themselves employed rhetorical strategies to reach certain aims. These aims do not only refer to abolition alone but instead to the freedom that comes with asserting themselves through writing. As mentioned previously, narrators had innumerable constraints on their narrative writing process. Maintaining agency over their stories and thus challenging authority required ingenious approaches. Through the medium of writing, the narrators could subtly push back against authority, wherein their "weapon is wit."[144]

Andrews is principally concerned with the rhetorical role of dialogue and the novelization of Black autobiography as expressions of freedom (through wit) in the storytelling process. Novelization refers to the process spelled out by M.M. Batktin by which second-wave slave narratives began incorporating literary elements typical of a novel like dialogue, humor,

[142] Andrews, *To Tell a Free Story,* 5.
[143] Ibid, 5.
[144] Ibid, 274.

self-parody, and open-endedness.[145] Andrews argues first that the "novelizing" of slave narratives prevented the genre from "conventionalizing" and "ossify[ing]."[146] Unlike Olney who complained of "overwhelming *sameness,*" Andrews focuses on how these novelizing elements ensured each narrative took on unique tones.[147]

Dialogue in the narratives in particular worked to shed light on social dynamics, at times subverting assumed power relations. For instance, through the inclusion of dialogue, the narrator could "flex his mental muscles" by recreating conversations demonstrative of the "master-slave relationship."[148] Dialogue in these cases showed that the "I talk – you listen" dynamic that was assumed between the slaveholder and the enslaved person was not in fact representative of how they interacted.[149] Narrators utilized dialogue as a rhetorical strategy to expose truths about slavery without being overt in their resistance. They also did so as an act of self-realization, one which involved "the reclaiming of language from the mouth of the white other."[150]

Andrews reasons that this journey toward "free telling" of stories was due to the thought that "One could not address the reality of black experience and speak of it truly unless one could speak of it freely."[151] In his analysis, narrators used the act of writing their narrative to progress towards self-liberation, relying on rhetorical techniques commonly found in novels to accomplish this.

John Sekora lays out his own interpretation of slave narratives as autobiography in his landmark essay "Black Message/White Envelope: Genre, Authenticity, and Authority in the Antebellum Slave Narrative" (1987). Historically contextualizing his argument, Sekora notes

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[145] Ibid, 272.
[146] Ibid.
[147] Olney, "I Was Born," 148.
[148] Andrews, *To Tell A Free Story,* 275
[149] Ibid.
[150] Ibid, 290.
[151] Ibid.

that by the early 1830s, “slave narratives” were being written about as a genre.[152] Despite these longstanding roots, literary critics and scholars were among the last to take an interest in the narratives. Amongst these scholars, little consensus has been reached regarding slave narratives as a literary form - as evidenced by James Olney and William L. Andrews' different stances on the term “autobiography,” for example. For Sekora, the literary history approach toward slave narratives is just beginning. Like Olney and Andrews, Sekora details some of the recurring tropes in the narratives, like the talking book. Many narratives include a scene where the narrator holds a book up to their ear hoping it will speak to them.[153] In this case, Sekora points out the talking book analogy to show that narrators must have been reading other narratives to model their own off of. This would only have been possible to the extent such stories were written down and published. Unlike the two aforementioned scholars, however, Sekora interprets the use of rhetorical strategies like analogy as part of the abolitionist’s strategy to make descriptions of slavery more palatable and persuasive to a “tepid and confused northern white audience.”[154]

While most critical scholarship on slave narratives at this point had de-centered the influence of abolitionist editors and publishers on the narrative’s content, Sekora urges readers to reconsider the influence of abolitionist editors and publishers and how their influence defined the literary form of the narratives. Specifically, Sekora is concerned with white institutional power and the way it shaped slave narratives. Sekora summarizes this idea, explaining that “The beginnings and endings of slaves’ lives are thus institutionally bound. Put another way, the slave is a witness in a double sense: eyewitness to a system that must be exposed, and witness called before abolitionist judges and jurors to reply to specific questions - no more, no less.”[155] Born

[152] Sekora, “Black Message/White Envelope,” 484.
[153] Sekora, “Black Message/White Envelope,” 490.
[154] Ibid, 494.
[155] Ibid, 502.

into a world structured by white institutions, first the system of slavery and eventually, in freedom, a white-dominated America, no person can evade the white systems that organize life. And even though the narrators personally experienced slavery, they nonetheless had to conform to abolitionist expectations on what they could write about and publishers' requirements for what they deemed worthy of publication. Furthermore, Sekora calls attention to the idea that narrators could not be "entrusted" with the telling of their own stories, thus compelling white sponsors to provide the conceptual frameworks for them.[156]

At all stages of the narrative creation and publication process, white influences dictated the resulting narratives. As a result, Sekora asserts that "The *voice* of the narratives is a white voice."[157] He even goes a step further to say that the genre is defined by the suppression of the narrator's voice.[158] The influence of the abolitionists and, moreover, the white systems that structure American culture and life forces Sekora to conclude that while slave narratives represent a distinct literary genre, they are neither autobiography nor an "Afro-American" genre.[159] In Sekora's words, the abolitionist influence is the white envelope through which the narrators could communicate their (edited) message. Echoing Olney, Sekora explains that the purpose of the slave narrative is not the "creation of a self," which is the goal in autobiography, and that memory does not order the narrative, "white interrogation" does.[160]

Looking towards the future, Sekora hopes that new literary histories "recognize that the silence of the slave narrative was partial and temporary" and that it will "attend to the gaps, the elisions, the contradictions, and especially the violations."[161] Regardless of literary categorization, Sekora is sure to note that slave narratives are "the only history of American

[156] Ibid, 506.
[157] Ibid, 510.
[158] Ibid.
[159] Ibid, 509.
[160] Ibid.
[161] Ibid, 511.

slavery we have" that can be used in good consciousness.[162] While Sekora envisions future discussion around the literary form of the narrative, he is sure to emphasize that slave narratives are invaluable historical sources no matter their literary classification.

All together, the 1960s-80s saw incredible progress in how scholars understood and approached slave narratives. In addition to the role of the ideas and attitudes of the Second Reconstruction in encouraging increased attention to issues of Black history in America, the republishing of slave narratives in the 1960s and later the publishing of the WPA interviews in 1972 meant slave narratives were more accessible than ever, facilitating and spurring innovative scholarly frameworks and considerations for making sense of slave narratives.

[162] Ibid, 512.

Chapter 4: Accessible Archives, Anthologies, and Book History: 1990s-2021

With slave narratives more accessible than ever due to the reprinting boom that began in the 1960s and continued in the decades that followed, in the 1990s scholars started compiling the works they found most important or pertinent to their arguments into collections and anthologies. In fact, while the 1960s was the first stage in republishing narratives that had fallen out of print like *The Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass*, the years that followed saw exponential increases in publication. Specifically, between 1980 and 1992, fifteen new editions of Douglass' narrative were published, then between 1992 and 1999 thirty-seven editions, and between 2000 and 2010, fifty-eight new editions were published.[163] These decades saw the republishing of stand-alone narratives as well as collections of narratives by editors.

Overwhelmingly, the scholarship on slave narratives during the late twentieth and early twenty-first century has been published in the form of an anthology or collections of essays, putting certain slave narratives together with one another or with other early Black literature in a single published volume. The publication of anthologies focused on slave narratives has spanned across the last three decades. Some notable examples include *The Classic Slave Narratives* (2002), *The Cambridge Companion to the African American Slave Narrative* (2007), *The Oxford Handbook of the African American Slave Narrative* (2014), *Unsung: Unheralded Narratives of American Slavery & Abolition* (2021), among others. Additionally, Documenting the American South, a digital publishing project founded in 1996 sponsored by the University Library at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, that publishes documents from the American South,

[163] Kachun, "Slave Narratives," 30.

published a collection called “North American Slave Narratives.” Edited by William L. Andrews, this online database put an unprecedented number of American slave narratives together on one webpage. This was essentially the final stage in the democratization of access to slave narratives; with this effort, anyone with a device that could connect to the internet would have full access to almost all recorded/recovered American slave narratives in a single place.

Books compiled on the subject of slave narratives during this period generally either make a rhetorical argument about certain narratives/writings, or argue for greater focus on lesser-known narratives, such as those written or published in a non-traditional manner, like in an independently published newspaper, or from non-traditional narrators, such as narratives by enslaved women (which still have not received adequate attention to this day).

Putting certain narratives and essays together in a single book marks a new progression in the role of publishing in filtering the stories that get told. Publishing slave narratives in this format makes the narratives increasingly accessible to the public, but also positions the narratives to be read in conjunction with each other as sources in a larger argument by the editor about their value not as individual biographies but as a collective body of work that provides insight in the history and culture of the time in which they were written. This practice of putting the narratives together in this way not only enabled more people to read slave narratives but also guided readers towards considering these stories collectively, a strategy endorsed by the editors who put the books together. These collections and anthologies mark a new development in the role publishing plays in how scholars and the general public understand slave narratives.

Following the development of scholarship in the most recent decades, the 2000s generally saw scholars reiterating and building on ideas originating in the 1980s, expanding on well-trod themes such as exploring the ways narrators exercised agency and authority over their

stories through subversive rhetorical strategies. By the 2010s, however, some began advocating for new approaches to slave narratives, ringing the alarm bell for scholars to not become resigned or complacent in the field. Many scholars specifically argued for the inclusion of book history and print culture studies in discussions about Black literary and cultural histories.

Beginning with the scholar at the forefront of Black literary history, Henry Louis Gates Jr.'s introduction to *The Classic Slave Narratives* (2002), a collection of Frederick Douglass, Harriet Jacobs, Mary Prince, and Olaudah Equiano's narratives, refers back to previous decades of scholarship. Gates Jr. explains that narrators had two focuses: indicting those who enslaved them and indicting the wider system that justified their enslavement. Crafting these arguments meant the writers of slave narratives had a comprehensive grasp on the theoretical inner workings of Southern society - the economy, social relations, cultural codes, and even (perhaps especially) the role of religion. This would have been a considerable achievement and speaks to the intellectual reasoning and deep cultural understanding that slave narrators leveraged. Gates Jr. contends that narrators attempted to accomplish these goals by using "the most enduring weapon" they had - the printing press.[164] Describing the printing press as a weapon harkens back to the pre-Civil War pro-slavery Southerners' panic over the effectiveness of the "weapon" slave narratives deployed in fighting against slavery. Even a century later, this rhetoric still resonates with Gates Jr.

One of Gates Jr.'s main arguments is that slave narratives should be viewed as a collective story, written on behalf of other enslaved people and representative of life experiences beyond those of the narrator. He describes slave narratives as a "communal utterance" rather than just one person's autobiography.[165] This interpretation de-emphasizes the minute details in each

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[164] Gates Jr., *The Classic Slave Narratives*, xiii.
[165] Gates Jr., xiii.

narrative (and their veracity) and instead positions the representativeness of slave narratives as a strength. If slave narratives should be understood as a "collective tale," it is possible to expand what is learned from one narrative to those whose stories did not get recorded, the "millions of silent slaves still held captive throughout the Caribbean, Latin America, and the American South."[166] Such lofty aims further complicate the writing process for the narrators and speak to the ways in which these document represent an even greater achievement.

Gates Jr. argues that slave narrators sought to organize their lives into autobiographies - "meaning[ful] and compelling patterns" - while also making broader arguments about other people who were enslaved. For example, one of the arguments Gates Jr. sees slave narrators making was an effort to prove that the narrators, and by extension all Black people, had the "potential for higher education and the right to be free."[167] As others have argued, Gates Jr. weighs the numerous constraints and conditions under which narrators wrote their narratives, thus contextualizing the motivations that determined which stories got recorded. The perspectives and arguments presented in this introduction set readers up to read the narratives that follow with a critical eye toward the context in which narrators were writing, and how it might have affected their stories, as they are written.

Building on the scholarship of William L. Andrews from the 1980s, other scholars in the 2000s returned to the role of rhetoric in the narratives as an exercise of the narrators' agency. In "The slave narrative and the revolutionary tradition of American autobiography," a chapter by Robert S. Levine in *The Cambridge Companion To The African American Narrative* (2007), Levine points out how narrators use rhetoric to exercise agency over their stories. Using the example of Harriet Jacobs' narrative, *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* (1861), Levine

[166] Ibid.
[167] Ibid, xiv.

contends that through “rhetorical resourcefulness” Jacobs was able to control the telling of her story, even while having a white editor.[168] Later, in 2014, Mitch Kachun built on these ideas in his chapter “Slave Narratives and Historical Memory” in *The Oxford Handbook of the African American Slave Narrative* (2014). Kachun argues that through the act of writing a narrative narrators sought to disprove the idea that enslaved people were inferior or not fully human. Therefore, writing narratives that strategically employed memory, themes, and rhetoric, proved the narrator's “intellectual legitimacy” and pushed back against racist ideas about what enslaved people were capable of doing.[169] Scholars like Levine and Kachun built on previous arguments about how narrators used rhetorical strategies to “maintain authority” over their narratives, regardless of the influence of white editors/abolitionists.[170]

The late 2000s marked a changing cultural moment. Emerging from the outdated racism of George H. W. Bush’s 1988 political campaign advertisements, Barack Obama was elected as the first Black President of the United States in 2008.[171] Electing a Black President was undeniably significant in America’s long, tumultuous history of racism rooted in histories of slavery. As a result of this milestone, the public once again had to stare issues of race and racism in the face. Even before Obama won the election, news media, like *The Washington Post*, ran stories inquiring about the Obama family’s relationship with slavery in the United States, detailing Michelle Obama’s family history beginning with her great-great-grandfather who was born into slavery.[172] Unquestionably, the nation was being confronted with Black histories and

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[168] Robert S. Levine, “The slave narrative and the revolutionary tradition of American autobiography,” in *The Cambridge Companion to the African American Slave Narrative* (Cambridge University Press, 2007), 112.
[169] Kachun, “Slave Narratives,” 25
[170] Levine, “The slave narrative,” 112.
[171] Christopher Morris, “With ‘the Economics-of-Slavery Culture Wars,’ It’s Déjà Vu All Over Again,” *Journal of the Civil War Era* 10, no. 4 (2020): 524.
[172] Shailagh Murray, “A Family Tree Rooted In American Soil,” *The Washington Post*, October 1, 2008. https://www.washingtonpost.com/archive/style/2008/10/02/a-family-tree-rooted-in-american-soil/7da1c20f-a7bb-43ba-819a-08aecf7e2825/

legacies in America as a result of Obama's nomination and subsequent election. Earlier that year, in July of 2008, the United States House of Representatives issued the first formal apology for slavery and Jim Crow segregation from the United States government, with the Senate issuing an apology almost a year later.[173] This confluence of events is arguably representative of a larger moment in which public attention was turned back yet again to the root of these conversations - the history of slavery in America.

These cultural moments set the stage for the 2010s, which saw a continued public interest in slavery, as seen through the increasing number of pop culture depictions of slavery in TV and movies. Pero Dagbovie, a University Distinguished Professor in the Department of History at Michigan State University, points to three popular examples of this trend, Quentin Tarantino's *Django Unchained* (2012), Steve McQueen's *12 Years a Slave* (2013), and the reboot of *Roots* in 2016 as a miniseries by Mark Wolper.[174] Of these notable examples, two are media depictions of books, the first being Solomon Northup's slave narrative *Twelve Years a Slave* (1853). In this sense, modern media (and modern "publishers" of electronic content) offered yet another way of presenting slave narratives to the public.

Given this renewed interest and attention, it comes as little surprise that the decade is also marked by scholars calling for a new approach to studying slave narratives, one that would precipitate discourse amongst scholars of literature, history, and culture through book history and print culture studies approaches.

With origins in the 1980s, book history was still considered a developing field of study in the early 2000s (and arguably still by the 2010s). In 1986, professor of Library and Information

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[173] U.S. Congress, *Apologizing for the enslavement and racial segregation of African-Americans*, 110th Cong., 2008, H.Res.194, https://www.congress.gov/bill/110th-congress/house-resolution/194.
[174] Pero Dagbovie, "Reflections on Black Public History: Past Present, Future," in *Radical Roots: Public History and a Tradition of Social Justice Activism* (Amherst College Press, 2021), 530.

Studies at Loughborough University John P. Feather explained that book history involves looking at the "complex" relationship between text and object.[175] He notes that authors can only picture their writing being distributed in the form that is current at their time. However, when "the techniques or the forms [of the text] undergo major changes," the reader's interpretation of the text changes significantly, and as such, historians must account for "these fundamental physical characteristics of the form in which a text reaches its audience."[176] Feather argues that the form in which a text is read will affect how the reader understands and interprets it. Therefore, it is worth studying texts as objects whose materiality is linked to what audiences get out of it.

Elaborating on Feather's ideas about form over a decade later, David Finkelstein and Allstair McCleery write in the introduction to *The Book History Reader* (2002) that as the book's "dominance has disappeared" in the modern day, being "usurped by other media," book history has reemerged - now able to contend with the book's past.[177] In the case of slave narratives, there are two remarkable instances of the "usurpation" from books to other media forms, namely depictions of slavery in movies and on TV and the reproduction of slave narratives on online databases like Documenting the American South. By connecting the emergence of book history into the scholarly mainstream to the diminished role of the book itself in the contemporary day due to the rise of other media, Finkelstein and McCleery lay the groundwork for the surging interest in using book history in the study of slave narratives, a trend which flourished by the 2010s.

[175] John P. Feather, "The Book in History and the History of the Book," *The Journal of Library History (1974-1987)* 21, no. 1 (1986): 13.
[176] Feather, "The Book in History," 13.
[177] David Finkelstein and Alistair McCleery, *The Book History Reader* (Routledge, 2002), 2, 3.

Leon Jackson's "The Talking Book and the Talking Book Historian: African American Cultures of Print – The State of the Discipline" (2010) elaborates on the importance of print culture and book history in the study of slave narratives. First, Jackson explains that scholars of African American literature and book historians, those who study books as material artifacts, have a history of ignoring each other in their studies. Specifically calling out Gates Jr., who has become one of the leading authoritative voices in the study of slave narratives, Jackson notes that these scholars have not "listened to, [nor] understood, the other."[178] When these two scholarly disciplines are kept separate, a host of potentially novel scholarly analyses goes unexplored, argues Jackson.

One area of study for book historians is print culture - a field that was relatively new in the 2010s and is still evolving.[179] Introducing this concept to the study of slave narratives, Jackson argues, would more sufficiently contextualize the production of slave narratives, thus adding to the discourse on how slave narratives should be read and understood. Referring to an article by Harold Love, Jackson writes that print culture investigates the relationships created between those involved in the production of the book, the sale and distribution, and the culture/relationship that are created by consuming and encountering printed materials.[180] Print culture paints a picture of the complex networks, "social matrices," and other factors that made the production of slave narratives possible.[181] This context illuminates ideas that do not get significant recognition in work by literary historians, asking novel questions such as in what ways was the narrator involved at various stages of the publication process.

[178] Jackson, "The Talking Book," 252.
[179] Ibid, 292.
[180] Ibid, 258.
[181] Ibid, 291.

According to Jackson, scholarship on African American literary history has either ignored or rejected the field of print culture studies to their detriment. Jackson positions the "antimaterialist and highly instrumental attitude towards books" of literary scholars as a part of a tradition that goes back to the early twentieth century.[182] Collectors of African American literature in the twentieth century, such as Schomburg, Springarn, and Boliver, conducted "enumerative work," wherein details such as version edits, textual variants, and other types of textual descriptions were not prioritized.[183] Scholars like William L. Andrews and Henry Louis Gates Jr. have continued in this tradition, rarely recognizing details like variances between editions in their work, to their detriment in Jackson's opinion.[184]

For Jackson, keeping print culture studies out of African American literary history and studies has been to the detriment of understanding of slave narratives. He concludes by calling on scholars across disciplines to read "both the outsides as well as the insides of texts" in order to put the two in conversation with one another. By reading slave narratives as texts but also as artifacts, and grappling with the context in which they were produced, scholars would enjoy insights into the narratives they had never before considered.

In "The Slave Narrative as Material Text" by Teresa A. Goddu, a professor of English and American Studies at Vanderbilt University, Goddu echoes Jackson's call for a book history approach. Specifically, Goddu argues that scholars should study slave narratives as material artifacts. This would involve searching for answers to questions like who published slave narratives and how much it cost.[185] By shifting from studying slave narratives as literary text to material objects, Goddu argues that scholars will gain a richer understanding of the historical

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[182] Ibid.
[183] Ibid, 292.
[184] Ibid.
[185] Teresa Goddu, "The Slave Narrative as Material Text" in *The Oxford Handbook of the African American Slave Narrative* (Oxford University Press, 2014), 149.

context in which the narratives were produced, thus adding "new insights into the genre's discursive meanings."[186] Coming at literary studies with a book history approach, which treats books as material artifacts, scholars could effectively reach new, nuanced conclusions about slave narratives

Michaël Roy, a professor of American studies at Université Paris Nanterre, similarly proposes taking a book history approach to slave narratives. In his article "Cheap Editions, Little Books, and Handsome Duodecimos: A Book History Approach to Antebellum Slave Narratives" (2015), Roy makes the compelling argument that because the fate of each narrative depended on how it was published and distributed, a book history approach is essential to our understanding of slave narratives.[187] Gesturing to the scholarship of the 1980s which focused on the form of the narratives, Roy draws the connection that scholarship that focuses on format might also draw attention to the context in which the narrative was produced. This connection could lead to a "better appreciation of the specificity of each slave narrative in antebellum print culture."[188] When accounting for these specificities, scholars might happen upon information that disrupts their current notions about slave narratives.

For example, through a book history approach, Roy illuminates a history that has long been overlooked - the Black readership/audience of slave narratives. Assuming that slave narratives were only read by white audiences is reactionary and unverifiable, Roy notes. With the context of a book history approach, Roy recalls the history of the *Weekly Anglo-African,* an outstanding newspaper in the Black northern community. At the *Weekly Anglo-African*'s office in New York, slave narratives were on sale, and the newspaper itself contained many reviews and

[186] Goddu, "The Slave Narrative as Material Text," 149.
[187] Michaël Roy, "Cheap Editions, Little Books, and Handsome Duodecimos: A Book History Approach to Antebellum Slave Narratives," *MELUS* 40, no. 3 (2015), 70.
[188] Roy, "Cheap Editions," 83.

advertisements about the narratives.[189] Further complicating understanding about publishing and white readership, Roy also points out that narratives like those of William Wells Brown and Frederick Douglass were circulated "outside the established channels of the literary marketplace…" in venues like newspaper offices.[190]

Therefore, Roy notes that it is limiting and simplistic to claim only white audiences were interested in slave narratives. In fact, threads of this thinking have been expressed previously, when looking at the concentration of second-wave narratives into what constitutes a literary genre. Scholars have in the past argued that Black narrators undoubtedly read each other's narratives. Yet, no other scholar has pointed out the presence of a Black (northern) audience reading without the intention to write. Roy was able to come to these conclusions by utilizing book history.

Almost ten years later, Roy came out with his book *Fugitive Texts: Slave Narratives in Antebellum Print Culture* (2022) which further argued for slave narratives to be studied as material artifacts. Pulling from the works of multiple prominent scholars before him, Roy begins by considering John Sekora's idea of slave narratives as Black messages in white envelopes. Roy argues that by focusing on the "white envelope," that is, the influence white abolitionists and more broadly the white systems of power structuring America had on slave narratives, the contributions of Black narrators in the production and dissemination of their stories get lost.[191]

Referring back to Leon Jackson, Roy highlights that scholars of slavery and scholars of print culture still rarely have shared aims. However, Roy admits there are difficulties in approaching slave narratives as material artifacts, especially due to the hasty republishing of the narratives in the 1960s. Published as "facsimiles," exact copies of the text rather than adding

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[189] Ibid, 85.
[190] Ibid.
[191] Michaël Roy, *Fugitive Texts* (University of Wisconsin Press, 2022), 5.

contextual information or textual editing, these widely accessible versions of the narratives obscured crucial details regarding their production.[192] For instance, the publication of these narratives did not include "producing scholarly editions reflecting the various stages the text went through or the author's intentions."[193] Similarly, slave narratives have since been published on online databases in a single, one-size-fits-all format, erasing the same contextual nuances for viewers. As a result, readers and scholars alike lose essential details about the production of slave narratives, confining scholarly arguments and understandings to unnecessarily narrowed conceptions by not employing a book history approach.

In addition to calls for book histories or studies into print culture, another recent focus in the scholarship has been to explore lesser-studied narratives, such as those narrated by women or those written/published in non-traditional formats. In Michaël Roy's "The Slave Narrative Unbound" (2019), Roy argues that the slave narrative is a more expansive category than studies of it would suggest. He makes this argument by pointing out that narratives published outside the form of a bound book have not received the same attention as those published as books. For instance, some slave narratives were published as pamphlets or as an amalgamation of letters, legal documents, and more.[194] These, Roy argues, "lack both the aura of prestige and the cultural legitimacy of a book" and are therefore not taken as seriously by scholars as slave narratives published as books.[195]

Furthermore, such untraditional narratives are still difficult for scholars to access in libraries. As is apparent in each era of scholarship on slave narratives, access is a driving force in shaping what scholars pay attention to at a given moment, and because non-traditional narratives

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[192] Roy, *Fugitive Texts*, 5.
[193] Ibid.
[194] Michaël Roy, "The Slave Narrative Unbound" in *Against a Sharp White Background: Infrastructures of African American Print* (University of Wisconsin Press, 2019), 262.
[195] Michaël Roy, "The Slave Narrative Unbound," 261.

did not go through the same publishing boom book-length narratives did, scholars have generally overlooked them. Back in 1946, Marion Wilson Starling's dissertation engaged in much of this work, considering slave narratives in any form she could find. Despite her early entry into the field, scholars like Roy argue that seventy-three years since Starling, scholars have still not paid adequate attention to these sources.

Since scholars have largely ignored non-traditional narratives, Roy contends that the slave narrative has been constricted in its conceptualization. By considering these lesser-studied narratives, scholars would realize that the slave narrative is a "more capacious category" than it has been understood.[196] To better make sense of the expansiveness of slave narratives, Roy notes that it is useful to reframe the narrative as a discursive practice, i.e. a process through which cultural meanings are produced, rather than a genre. This perspective would open the field up to non-traditional narratives, or "differently told stories," and also contribute to understandings of what the slave narrative meant to Americans at the time they were originally published.[197] Overall, opening up conceptions of slave narratives to accommodate the breadth of writings the category encompasses will only deepen the way scholars use and understand slave narratives.

An even more recent anthology, *Unsung: Unheralded Narratives of American Slavery & Abolition* (2021) emphasizes the way new scholarship is shifting understandings of slave narratives. Specifically, the anthology seeks to "go beyond" how slavery is typically portrayed by highlighting "underexposed stories, and fresh perspectives."[198] Some of these underexposed stories include African American women's literature and the legacy of Black print culture, including Black authors and publishers who do not receive enough attention. Like other scholars,

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[196] Ibid, 271.
[197] Ibid.
[198] Kevin Young and Michelle D. Commander, *Unsung: Unheralded Narratives of American Slavery & Abolition* (Penguin Books, 2021), xvi.

the anthology also argues that narrators were "agents and architects" of their lives, honing in on the "subversions" they employed in defining themselves through their stories.[199]

Through anthologies and collections that include compilations of slave narratives or scholarly writing about the narratives, editors, and authors have inserted arguments directly alongside the narratives themselves, shaping readers' interpretations and understandings. Following the pattern laid out in the 1980s, many of these newer works concentrate on how narrators subverted their white editors/publishers by using rhetorical strategies to personalize their stories. Other scholars have argued for the inclusion of book history and print culture studies in order to better contextualize the process of producing a slave narrative and all that followed after publication, thus highlighting minimized histories such as the role of Black publishers and newspapers. Finally, scholars have pointed out lapses in the field, such as how certain types of narratives, like those outside of the bound book or those narrated by women, are still not receiving the scholarly attention they deserve.

[199] Young and Commander, *Unsung,* xvii.

Conclusion:

Epilogue: Where Slavery Stands Today: 2020s

No analysis of the historiography of slave narratives would be complete without a consideration of the 2020s (and the years leading up to it). This time period is already shaping up to have profound effects on conceptions of race and racism in America. Defined by cultural moments such as the opening of the National Museum of African American History and Culture in 2016 in Washington, D.C., and the resurgence of the Black Lives Matter movement in 2020 in response to police murders of innocent Black people, and bolstered by social media, conversations about the Black experience, the history of racism in America, and the legacies of slavery have reached a fever pitch in recent years. Concurrently, several monumental books and projects have been published which have been instrumental in reframing the legacies of slavery in America on American systems, structures, and people.

Heading into the decade, Nikole Hannah-Jones' "1619 Project" was published in the New York Times Magazine in August of 2019. The project, later published as a book in 2021, built "a historical analysis of how slavery shaped American political, social, and economic institutions" by arguing that "slavery's legacy still shapes American life."[200] Though the project was met with equal parts criticism and praise, Hannah-Jones' sentiment about the ways slavery's legacy can be felt in America today is not a brand new idea. Earlier, in 2016, Christina Sharpe, professor of English literature and Black Studies at York University, published her book *In The Wake: On Blackness and Being* wherein Sharpe employs her own frameworks and praxis to describe the

[200] Adam Serwer, "The Fight Over the 1619 Project Is Not About the Facts: A dispute between a small group of scholars and authors of *The New York Times Magazine's* issue on slavery represents a fundamental disagreement over the trajectory of American society," *The Atlantic*, December 23, 2019.

"still unfolding aftermaths" of slavery on the Black experience.[201] Though *In The Wake* did not generate the same level of interest and public attention as the "1619 Project," Sharpe's conceptions of the ongoing effects of anti-blackness in the African Diaspora were nonetheless groundbreaking. Sharpe positioned slavery as "the past that is not past," implying that the only way to make sense of Black life today is to acknowledge that slavery was not an isolated event with a beginning and an end, as so many believe, but instead that America is still living in the "wake" of slavery, still touched by slavery's after-effects.[202] Again, in addition to making the case for studying lesser-known slave narratives, *Unsung: Unheralded Narratives of American Slavery & Abolition* (2021), an anthology compiled by the Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture, also notes the relevance of slave narratives in twenty-first century America where the effects of slavery are still seen every day. The editors point out instances of police violence and "unfounded attitudes about Black people," as part of the legacies that can be traced back to slavery.[203]

These books and works suggest that making sense of everything from systemic to casual racism in America starts with understanding American slavery - the legacy of which has influenced how America got to where it is today. These books have echoes of Arturo A. Schomburg's Harlem Renaissance era argument that one must first "remake" their past if they wish to shape their future.[204] Only by understanding the complexities of where the complicated state of race relations in the United States originated can people begin to affect change in America for the better.

[201] Sharpe, *In the Wake,* 2
[202] Sharpe, *In the Wake*, 9.
[203] Young and Commander, *Unsung,* xv.
[204] Schomburg, "The Negro Digs Up His Past," 670.

Other influential books of this period that deal with slavery and its aftershocks include *Slavery's Capitalism* (2016) edited by Sven Beckert and Seth Rockman and Tiya Miles' *All That She Carried: The Journey of Ashley's Sack, a Black Family Keepsake* (2021). In *Slavery's Capitalism*, Berkert and Rockman build the argument that slavery was central to the development of American capitalism as it has come to be, thus intimately entangling slavery into the economic system that structures American life today. The book traces another through-line from slavery to the present, this time through an economic lens. Tiya Miles' *All That She Carried* traces an enslaved woman's life through the trajectory of one object. To do so, Miles conducted thorough archival work to carve out one woman's story. This endeavor demonstrates yet again the rhetorical value of telling and highlighting an individual's story in uncovering the larger and more universal realities of slavery.

In short, interest in American slavery and its legacies is not waning, and publishers are continuing to publish these exciting new analyses. The chief concern of the 2020s appears to be drawing connections from the past to the present, using histories to better understand the current political, cultural, and even economic state of America. And while it may be too early to tell, the continued interest in these subjects as exemplified by the myriad of award-winning books and works, and the interest of publishers in publishing them, could be indicative of yet another reconsideration of slave narratives in the struggle for making sense of America today.

Takeaways:

In this thesis, I have argued that publishers have played an outsized role in shaping the way scholars have used, understood, and analyzed American slave narratives.

By centering publishers as agents of influence, controlling the narrative of what readers should find important or relevant at any given time, the contours of changing scholarly opinion come into focus. To make these points, I conducted a rich historiographical study, dividing my research into distinct eras of scholarly research and contextualizing the intellectual, cultural, social, political, and economic moments in which scholars wrote.

In many ways, the slave narrative is a case study in how to grapple with a dynamic primary source whose meaning and use by scholars remains in flux. Thus, the study of how scholars have studied slave narratives is a cautionary tale that has implications for historians of all areas of study. Historians and scholars must take into consideration the role publishers, publishing practices, and access to archives more generally, play in shaping the stories that get told.

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