The Literature of Slavery and Freedom
1746–1865

THE RELIGIOUS AND POLITICAL MISSION OF AFRICAN AMERICAN LITERATURE

The engendering impulse of African American literature is resistance to human tyranny. The sustaining spirit of African American literature is dedication to human dignity. As resistance to tyranny and dedication to human dignity became increasingly synonymous with the idea of America itself in the latter half of the eighteenth century, early African American writers identified themselves as Americans with a special mission. They would articulate the spiritual and political ideals of America to inspire and justify the struggle of blacks for their birthright as American citizens. They would also demand fidelity to those same ideals from whites whose moral complacency and racial prejudices had blinded them to the obligations of their own heritage.

Although the ideals of equality and liberty celebrated by the founders of the United States drew their legitimacy from intertwined religious and political traditions, the racial chauvinism of most white Americans in the early republic forced a separation of their religious and political responsibilities to blacks. In the realm of the spirit, most whites were content with African American claims to an equal right to God’s grace, as long as African American salvation did not entail a radical redemption of the white-dominated social order. In the political sphere, however, whites presumed themselves alone to be the arbiters of rights and privileges.

Recognizing this contradiction in white America’s attitude toward black advancement, the first African American writers in the United States appealed to the traditional Christian gospel of the universal brotherhood of humanity as a way of initiating a discussion with whites that did not directly confront their prejudices and anxieties. Readers of Phillis Wheatley’s Poems on Various Subjects, Religious and Moral (1773), which won international attention as the first African American work of literature, found much more evidence of the Boston slave poet’s piety than her politics. Even in one of her rare poems about her personal experience as an African American, On Being Brought from Africa to America, Wheatley spoke of black equality to whites in terms that appeared limited to matters of the spirit:

Some view our sable race with scornful eye,
"Their colour is a diabolic die."
Remember, Christians, Negros, black as Cain,
May be refin’d, and join th’ angelic train.

Despite the self-deprecating treatment of color in this poem, by insisting that color is no barrier to black ascension to spiritual heights, Wheatley may have been invit-
ing her white reader to consider whether color should bar African Americans from rising in the social and political scale either.

Wheatley and her fellow pioneers in African American poetry, Massachusetts balladeer Lucy Terry and Jupiter Hammon, a New York slave, as well as Briton Hammon, who produced the first work of African American prose, *A Narrative of the Uncommon Sufferings and Surprising Deliverance of Briton Hammon, a Negro Man* (1760), all seem to have been motivated primarily by a desire to win a popular Christian readership. Nevertheless, their appearance on the American literary scene, however safely conventional their piety and its expression may seem today, had social significance. As slaves or former slaves, all placed white readers on notice that even the least advantaged of black Americans had feelings to voice and stories to tell to the public at large. Moreover, as writers who employed the arts of literacy with independent purpose—which the white-authored preface to Wheatley’s *Poems* was at pains to attest—poets such as Wheatley and Jupiter Hammon contradicted a widespread European prejudice that black people were incapable of literary expression. Mastery of language, the essential sign of a civilized mind to the European, implicitly qualified a black writer, and by analogy those whom he or she represented, for self-mastery and a place of respect within white civilization.

From the outset, African American literature challenged the dominant culture’s attempt to segregate the religious from the political, the spirit from the flesh, insofar as racial affairs were concerned. Within two years of the publication of her landmark book of poems, Wheatley was articulating without equivocation the holistic view of spiritual and political issues on which later generations of African American writing would be founded. In 1774 she commented that she could discern “more and more clearly, the glorious Dispensation of civil and religious Liberty, which are so inseparably united, that there is little or no Enjoyment of one without the other.” By the early nineteenth century, civil rights agitators like Maria W. Stewart felt no compunction in affirming God’s investment in both the eternal and the earthly redemption of black people. Echoing, perhaps even alluding to, Wheatley’s famous quatrain in *On Being Brought from Africa to America*, Stewart announced to African Americans in 1831: “Many think, because your skins are tinged with a sable hue, that you are an inferior race of beings; but God does not consider you as such.” By invoking divine sanction for African American social strivings, writers like Stewart brought to fruition the earliest black writers’ efforts to dignify black experience with spiritual significance and divinely ordained importance.

In the eyes of the standard-bearers of early African American literature, all of God’s laws were indivisible because all of God’s people were one. Jesus, the suffering servant, bore powerful witness to God’s love of mercy; Moses, the deliverer of the Israelites from bondage in Egypt, testified just as compellingly to God’s devotion to justice. Spurred by a conviction of their own special calling to witness against America’s spiritual and political degeneration, early black writers such as Olaudah Equiano, David Walker, Maria Stewart, and ultimately Frederick Douglass exhorted their white readers like preachers imploring a backsliding congregation to live up to the standards of their reputed religion and their profession political principles. “O, ye nominal Christians!” Equiano thundered to the white readers of his *Interesting Narrative of the Life of Olaudah Equiano, or Gustavus Vassa, the African* (1789) after surveying the horrors of the notorious Middle Passage endured by millions of Africans before they were sold into slavery in the Americas: “might not an African ask you—Learned you this from your God, who says unto you, Do unto all men as you would men should do unto you?” In a similar vein, Benjamin Banneker, a black mathematician and almanac maker, wrote Secretary of State Thomas Jefferson in 1791 to ask how the author of the Declaration of Independence could denounce Britain’s tyranny over its American colonies in 1776 with-
INTRODUCTION

out also opposing "that state of tyrannical thraldom and inhuman captivity to which too many of my brethren are doomed" in the newly formed United States. Are you not also "guilty of that most criminal act which you professedly detested in others?" Banneker inquired with unassailable logic.

Representing themselves as faithful adherents to the humanitarian ideals of Christianity and the American Revolution, early African American writers explored through various forms of irony the chasm between white America's words and its deeds, between its propaganda about freedom and its widespread practice of slavery. David Walker's Appeal, in Four Articles; Together with a Preamble, to the Coloured Citizens of the World (1829) is predicated on a structural irony anticipated in its very title. Like the U.S. Constitution, Walker's Appeal begins with a preamble followed by four articles. Unlike the Constitution, which legalized slavery in the United States, Walker's text demands slavery's abolition and warns of the deconstruction of the United States by God's avenging power if slavery is not ended. One of the most famous instances of irony in early African American literature appears in James M. Whitfield's America (1853), a bitter parody of the popular patriotic hymn America the Beautiful. The opening lines of Whitfield's poem announce:

America, it is to thee,
Thou boasted land of liberty,—
It is to thee I raise my song,
Thou land of blood, and crime, and wrong.

Whitfield's cry of betrayal at the hands of America summarized decades of increasingly vocal black outrage over the fundamental hypocrisy of the United States' self-congratulatory image as the "land of the free."

The grotesque inconsistency between the United States' championing of "life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness" in its own Declaration of Independence and its sanctioning of the crime of chattel slavery furnished early African American literature with its most enduring theme. Initially, African American writers like Benjamin Banneker used the egalitarian language of the Declaration of Independence to try to shame white America into abolishing slavery. But as early as the expatriate Victor Séjour's pioneering short story The Mulatto (1837), and with increasing vehemence in the speeches of mid-century black America's most eloquent platform orators, such as Henry Highland Garnet and Frederick Douglass, the right of African Americans to armed resistance to slavery was proclaimed. The Founding Fathers' justification of revolution—particularly Patrick Henry's "Give me liberty or give me death" speech in 1775 to the Virginia assembly—gave ample precedent for violent action in the name of freedom. Regardless of the means of rhetorical attack, African American literature throughout the pre–Civil War era maintained as its central priorities the abolition of slavery and the promotion of the black man and woman to a status in the civil and cultural order equal to that of whites.

SLAVERY IN THE AMERICAS

To prosecute their war of words against slavery, early black advocates of freedom became students of the long and sordid history of human bondage, which dated back to ancient Egypt, Greece, and Rome. One such self-educated historian, David Walker, acknowledged that slavery had long been practiced in Africa, but he charged white Christian slaveholders with greater crimes against humanity and greater hypocrisy in justifying those crimes than any prior slave system had been guilty of. Twentieth-century scholarship has lent much support to the contentions of Walker and others in the African American antislavery vanguard that slavery as
perpetrated by the European colonizers of Africa and the Americas brought man’s inhumanity to man to a level of technological efficiency unimagined by previous generations.

When Portuguese mariners began trading gold, ivory, and spices with the chiefs of the coast of West Africa in the mid-fifteenth century, they discovered that African prisoners of war and their children could be readily supplied for sale as slaves. The slave trade among North and West Africans was an established institution, though the status of slave in these parts of Africa did not carry with it the stigma with which European and American slave traders and slaveholders branded the African. After the discovery of the so-called New World, its Spanish conquerors instituted particularly brutal forms of slavery as soon as enough power could be consolidated to turn the native population into a compulsory work force. Ironically, the horrific effects of the Spanish enslavement of the indigenous peoples of Central America triggered the first importation of African slaves into the Western Hemisphere. In 1517 Bartolomé de las Casas, a Spanish missionary to the Caribbean island of Hispaniola, recommended to his political superiors that Africans be imported to the Spanish colonies to relieve the appalling mistreatment of the indigenous peoples of New Spain. Before the slave trade to the Americas was abolished in the late nineteenth century, at least ten million human beings had been brought to North and South America against their will, to be subjected to one of the most inhuman systems of social and economic oppression the world has ever seen.

The first black people who came to North America were not slaves, however, but explorers. Among the most famous were Espevanico (d. 1539), who opened up what is now New Mexico and Arizona for Spanish settlement, and Jean Baptiste Point du Sable (1745–1818), who founded a trading post on the southern shore of Lake Michigan from which the city of Chicago grew. The first Africans in British North America were brought to work as laborers. They arrived at Jamestown, Virginia, in 1619 aboard a Dutch slave ship. Only twenty in number, including at least three women, these people had survived the desperate Middle Passage from their homeland to America, a voyage so harsh that it is estimated that one in eight Africans died in transit without ever reaching the slave markets of the New World. Initially, the black people brought to the Virginia colony were not considered slaves. They were classed as indentured servants who could become free if they worked satisfactorily for their masters for a stipulated number of years. But by 1700, the growing plantation economy of Virginia demanded a work force that was cheaper than free labor and more easily controlled. By establishing the institution of chattel slavery, in which a black person became not just a temporary servant but the lifetime property of his or her white master, the tobacco, cotton, and rice planters of British North America ensured their rise to economic and political preeminence over the southern half of what would become the United States.

Under chattel slavery, the African imported to North America was divested as much as possible of his or her culture. The newly minted slave was relegated to a condition that the historian Orlando Patterson has termed “social death.” Although much evidence demonstrates that some African religious beliefs, cultural practices, and linguistic forms survived the Middle Passage, the system of chattel slavery was designed to prevent Africans and their descendants from building a new identity except in accordance with the dictates of their oppressors. Instead of an individual, slavery devised what Patterson calls “a social nonperson,” a being that by legal definition could have no family, no personal honor, no community, no past, and no future. The intention of slavery was to create in the slave a sense of complete alienation from all human ties except those that bound him or her in absolute dependence to the master’s will. Self-reliance, a cardinal tenet of the popular American
doctrine of rugged individualism, was forbidden the slave, since the very notion of selfhood had no meaning or application to those who could not even possess themselves.

SLAVERY AND AMERICAN RACISM

What gave American chattel slavery its uniquely oppressive character and power was its insistence that enslavement was the natural and proper condition for particular races of people. Reinforced by theories of racial difference promoted by such prestigious philosophers as Friedrich Hegel, Immanuel Kant, and David Hume, most Europeans and Americans assumed that differences in externals—complexion, hair, and other physical features—between blacks and whites signified differences in the inherent character—intelligence, morality, and spirituality—of the two groups. When Thomas Jefferson reviewed what he considered to be the major differences between whites and blacks, he concluded that these differences were so deep and ineradicable that only complete separation of the races, with whites in control until such time as blacks could be removed from the country, could avert race war in the United States.

Jefferson’s Notes on the State of Virginia (1787) contained a powerful condemnation of slavery, but the book also became an influential statement of early American racism because of Jefferson’s persistent association of blackness with absence. After celebrating “the fine mixtures of red and white” that endow the complexions of whites with their “superior beauty,” Jefferson contemplated with an almost palpable shudder “that eternal monotony, which reigns in the countenances of black people, that inmoveable veil of black which covers all the emotions of the other race.” Thus darkness of skin symbolized for Jefferson an absence of light within the African American, a void that made blackness the sign not merely of skin difference but also of an unknowable alien, a threatening other. Providing intellectual and moral cover for slavery’s naked politics of exploitation, a sizable school of racist writers in the first half of the nineteenth century in the United States followed Jefferson in arguing that the African American’s physical and cultural difference amounted to an intellectual, spiritual, and moral otherness that only slavery could manage and turn to some productive account.

RESISTANCE TO SLAVERY AND RACISM

After the United States won its war for independence from Britain in 1783, the cause of African American freedom earned a number of notable regional victories despite being stymied in the national political arena. To win the endorsement of the southern states, the framers of the U.S. Constitution wrote into law several measures that protected slavery, in particular the infamous “three-fifths compromise,” which stipulated that a slave could be counted as three-fifths of a person for the purpose of apportioning representation for a given district in the Congress. Since slaves could not vote, the three-fifths compromise did nothing but augment the size and power of the southern bloc in the U.S. House of Representatives. Undaunted, antislavery advocates in Pennsylvania and New York, supported by the Society of Friends (Quakers), the most vocal religious group to oppose slavery in the North American colonies, issued a call for the gradual abolition of slavery in the new republic. The gradualism of those known as “moral suasionists” enjoyed genuine success when Vermont banned slavery in 1777 and emancipationists pushed through abolition laws in Pennsylvania (1780), Rhode Island (1784), Connecticut (1784), New York (1799), and New Jersey (1804). By the end of the first decade of the nineteenth century, slavery was effectively a dead letter in all the states of the North and in the burgeoning Northwest Territory. Bowing to antislavery pressure in 1807,
the U.S. Congress went so far as to outlaw the African slave trade, though it left the internal slave trade alone.

In the early decades of the nineteenth century, African Americans in the North joined with fair-minded whites to bring about additional social and political advances. African American newspapers, inaugurated by Freedom's Journal in 1827, urged through essays, poetry, and fiction as well as more conventional journalism the achievements of black people in the North and the need for an end to slavery in the South. Committed to improved educational opportunity, African Americans pushed for the admission of their children to the early public schools of the North and vigorously protested against laws that excluded them. Independent black Methodist and Baptist churches, led by thoughtful and respected black leaders, bore witness to the solidarity and progressive outlook of northern black communities, as did the rise of various mutual-aid, fraternal, and debating societies in cities such as New York, Philadelphia, and Boston. Racial prejudice, discrimination, and segregation remained endemic in the states of North, however, indifferent to the evidence of the self-improvement and good citizenship of many African Americans.

In the South, where racism provided the cornerstone of the social, economic, and political order, African Americans could do little to alter their circumstances. The living conditions of slaves remained almost totally dependent on the disposition of individual masters. The legal status of free persons of color deteriorated as their numbers shrank in the South after 1800. Antislavery proponents in the upper South were able to liberalize laws that made it easier to emancipate slaves. But the expansion of the British textile industry, together with changes in the farming and processing of cotton in the United States during the 1790s, wedded the South more and more tightly to slavery. The invention of the cotton gin, a labor-saving device that provided a cheap means of separating cotton fiber from its seed, turned Southern agriculture at the turn of the century into "the cotton kingdom." Cotton plantations, on which a hundred or more slaves labored from dawn to dusk six days a week, sprang up over the lower South and in the opening territories of the trans-Mississippi Valley. Slaveholding seemed the key to unlocking vast new wealth from the land. As a consequence the slave population in the South grew rapidly, from seven hundred thousand in 1790 to two million in 1830.

In the late summer of 1831 in Southampton County, Virginia, an insurrection of slaves fomented by a black preacher named Nat Turner crystallized the impending crisis into which slavery was taking the South. Convinced that he had been called by God to usher in the biblically prophesied Day of Judgment, Turner led his followers, who numbered between sixty and eighty, in a bloody march toward Jerusalem, the county seat, where he intended to seize its arsenal and munitions supply. Before they were scattered and apprehended by state and federal troops, Turner's loosely disciplined army executed sixty whites, including Prophet Nat's master and family. Turner remained at large until his capture in late October. After dictating a narrative hurried into publication under the title The Confessions of Nat Turner, the leader of the most successful slave revolt in U.S. history was hanged on November 11, 1831. It is estimated that fifty thousand copies of Turner's decidedly unrepentant "confessions" were printed, making this the most widely read African American personal narrative since Equiano's in 1789.

The slaveholding South was permanently traumatized by Turner's insurrection. The Virginia state legislature debated whether to abolish slavery or make it more repressive, deciding in the end to follow the latter course. Throughout the South tighter restrictions were placed on free blacks; on black opportunities to assemble, especially in church; on black ministers; and on the access of slaves to books (even the Bible) as well as to literacy. Those who held the reins of power in the South became increasingly belligerent in their defense of slavery and their determination
to see it extended into the new territories beyond the Mississippi River that were lobbying for statehood. Regarding each other with heightening suspicion, representatives of the slave and the free states in the U.S. Congress seemed powerless to prevent the polarization of the two regions of the country. Various compromises were enacted—the most controversial of which was the Compromise of 1850, which among other things instituted the Fugitive Slave Law—so that a balance of power might be maintained between the North and South. Nevertheless, compromise only intensified the feeling in each section that the opposition was gaining an unfair share of power.

RADICAL ABOLITIONISM AND THE FUGITIVE SLAVE NARRATIVE

In the aftermath of the Turner revolt and the South’s iron-fisted response to it, a new generation of reformers in the North proclaimed their absolute and uncompromising opposition to slavery. Led by the crusading white journalist William Lloyd Garrison, these abolitionists demanded the immediate end of slavery throughout the United States. Free blacks in the North lent their support to Garrison’s American Anti-Slavery Society, editing newspapers, holding conventions, circulating petitions, and investing their money and their energies in protest actions. Searching for a means of galvanizing public concern for the slave as “a man and a brother,” this generation of black and white radical abolitionists sponsored a new departure in African American literature, the fugitive slave narrative. From 1830 to the end of the slavery era, the fugitive slave narrative dominated the literary landscape of antebellum black America, far outnumbering the autobiographies of free people of color, not to mention the handful of novels published by African Americans. Most of the major authors of African American literature before 1865, including Olaudah Equiano, Frederick Douglass, William Wells Brown, and Harriet Jacobs, launched their writing careers via narratives of their experience as slaves.

Typically the antebellum slave narrative carried a black message inside a white envelope. Prefatory (and sometimes appended) matter by whites attested to the reliability and good character of the narrator and called attention to what the narrative would reveal about the moral abominations of slavery. The former slave’s contribution to the text centered on his or her rite of passage from slavery in the South to freedom in the North. Usually the antebellum slave narrator portrayed slavery as a condition of extreme physical, intellectual, emotional, and spiritual deprivation, a kind of hell on earth. Precipitating the narrator’s decision to escape was some sort of personal crisis, such as the sale of a loved one or a dark night of the soul in which hope contends with despair for the spirit of the slave. Impelled by faith in God and a commitment to liberty and human dignity comparable (the slave narrative often stressed) to that of America’s Founding Fathers, the slave undertook an arduous quest for freedom that climaxed in his or her arrival in the North. In many antebellum narratives, the attainment of freedom was signaled not simply by reaching the free states but by renaming oneself and dedicating one’s future to antislavery activism.

Advertised in the abolitionist press and sold at antislavery meetings throughout the English-speaking world, a significant number of antebellum slave narratives went through multiple editions and sold in the tens of thousands. This popularity was not solely attributable to the publicity the narratives received from the antislavery movement. Readers could see that, as one reviewer put it, “the slave who endeavours to recover his freedom is associating with himself no small part of the romance of the time.” To the noted transcendentalist clergyman Theodore Parker, slave narratives qualified as America’s only indigenous literary form, for “all the original romance of Americans is in them, not in the white man’s novel.” The most
widely read and hotly debated American novel of the nineteenth century, Harriet Beecher Stowe’s *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* (1852), was profoundly influenced by its author’s reading of a number of slave narratives, to which she owed many graphic incidents and the models for some of her most memorable characters.

In 1845 the slave narrative reached its epitome with the publication of the *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, an American Slave, Written by Himself*. A fugitive from Maryland slavery, Douglass spent four years honing his skills as an abolitionist lecturer before setting about the task of writing his autobiography. In deciding to author his own story rather than enlist a white editor to transcribe his oral testimony and fashion that into a book, Douglass made a crucial break with established procedure in the publishing of slave narratives. At the risk of public censure for egotism and incompetence (he had never had a day’s schooling in his life), Douglass resolved to write his own story in his own way. He was determined to bear witness to the self-awareness, intellectual independence, and literary authority of the slave. After Douglass’s immensely successful *Narrative*, the presence of the subtitle, *Written by Himself*, on a slave narrative bore increasing significance as an indicator of a narrator’s political and literary self-reliance. In the late 1840s well-known fugitive slaves such as William Wells Brown, Henry Bibb, and James W. C. Pennington reinforced the rhetorical self-consciousness of the slave narrative by incorporating into their stories trickster motifs from African American folk culture, extensive literary and biblical allusion, and a picareseque perspective on the meaning of the slave’s flight from bondage to freedom.

As social and political conflict in the United States at mid-century centered more and more on the presence and fate of African Americans, the slave narrative took on an unprecedented urgency and candor, unmasking as never before the moral and social complexities of the American caste and class system in the North as well as the South. *My Bondage and My Freedom* (1855), Douglass’s second autobiography, conducted a fresh inquiry into the meaning of slavery and freedom, adopting the standpoint of one who had spent enough time in the so-called free states to understand how pervasive racism and paternalism was, even among the most liberal whites, the Garrisonians themselves. Harriet Jacobs, the earliest known African American female slave to author her own narrative, also challenged conventional ideas about slavery and freedom in her strikingly original *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* (1861). Jacobs’s autobiography shows how sexual exploitation made slavery especially oppressive for black women. But in demonstrating how she fought back and ultimately gained both her own freedom and that of her two children, Jacobs proved the inadequacy of the image of victim that had been pervasively applied to female slaves in the male-authored slave narrative. The writing of Jacobs; the feminist oratory of the “Libyan sybil,” Sojourner Truth; and the renowned example of Harriet Tubman, the fearless conductor of runaways on the Underground Railroad enriched African American literature with new models of female self-expression and heroism.

THE FIRST AFRICAN AMERICAN LITERARY RENAISSANCE

These developments in the slave narrative, along with the publication of several pioneering experiments in fiction, justify calling the 1850s and early 1860s the first renaissance in African American letters. In these years black writers began to expand their horizons, both in terms of the forms they developed and the themes they adopted. In 1853 Frederick Douglass published a historical novella, *The Heroic Slave*, in his own newspaper, *Frederick Douglass’ Paper*. The protagonist of Douglass’s story, Madison Washington, who actually led a successful slave mutiny in 1841, gave American readers a model of black manhood that carefully balanced the
violent desire for justice of Nat Turner and the Christian pacifism of Stowe's Uncle Tom. Soon after The Heroic Slave the first full-length African American novel was published in England under the title Clotel; or, The President's Daughter. Authored by William Wells Brown, who had already distinguished himself as the writer of an internationally celebrated slave narrative as well as the first travel book by an African American, Clotel blurred the line between fact and fiction by recounting the tragic career of a beautiful and idealistic light-skinned woman reputed to be the daughter of Thomas Jefferson and his slave mistress. Clotel helped popularize the sentimental image of the "tragic mulatta" in American fiction and drama. But the ultimate outcome of her story, in which Clotel transforms herself into a combative trickster figure to rescue her daughter from slavery, shows Brown testing the limits of gender conventions in fiction. Five years later, Brown contributed again to the outpouring of literary creativity among blacks at mid-century by fashioning the first African American play, The Escape; or, A Leap for Freedom, based on scenes and themes familiar to readers of fugitive slave narratives.

In 1859 Martin R. Delany, a black journalist and physician who would later serve as a major in the Federal Army during the Civil War, produced Blake; or, The Huts of America, a novel whose hero plots a slave revolt in the South. Delany's Blake represents the first black nationalist culture hero in African American literature. In the same year the first African American women's fiction also appeared: The Two Offers, a short story by Frances Ellen Watkins Harper, and Our Nig; or, Sketches from the Life of a Free Black, an autobiographical novel by Harriet E. Wilson. Among the poetic voices of black America Harper's was preeminent at mid-century. The African American reading community embraced her as a writer who spoke to the needs and aspirations of slaves and free people alike in verse that was direct, impassioned, and morally inspiring. In contrast, the literary work of Harriet Wilson received little or no notice, despite (or perhaps because of) her unprecedented, tough-minded investigation of the socioeconomic realities of life for a black working-class woman in the North.

FOLK TRADITIONS

Behind the achievements of individual African American writers during the anti-slavery period lies the communal consciousness of millions of slaves, whose oral tradition in song and story has given form and substance to literature by black people since they first began writing in English. In his Narrative, Frederick Douglass recalled having received his first glimmering sense of the awful evil of slavery by listening to the work songs of his fellow slaves in Maryland. Later in his life he revealed that the familiar plantation spiritual "Run to Jesus" had first suggested to him the thought of making his escape from slavery. The genius of the spirituals rested in their double meaning, their blending of the spiritual and the political. When slaves sang "I thank God I'm free at las' " only they knew whether they were referring to freedom from sin or from slavery. Even in those spirituals that express a poignant yearning for deliverance in heaven from earthly burdens, one can hear a powerful complaint against the institutions that forced black people to believe that only in the next world would they find justice.

A second great fund of southern black folklore, the animal tales, testified to the slaves' commonsense understanding of human psychology and everyday justice in this world. Although many of these tales explained in comic fashion how the world came to be as it is, many more concentrated on the exploits of trickster figures, most notably Brer Rabbit, who used their wits to overcome stronger animal antagonists. Tales that celebrate the trickster, whether in animal or human form, are universal in human folklore. Still the popularity of Brer Rabbit in the folklore of the slaves
attests to the enduring faith of black Americans in the power of mind over matter. The spirit of Brer Rabbit lived in every slave who deceived his master with a smile of loyalty while stealing from his storehouse and making plans for escape.

THE CIVIL WAR AND EMANCIPATION

In 1860 the first avowedly antislavery candidate for president, Abraham Lincoln of the Republican Party, was elected in one of the bitterest campaigns ever waged in the United States. Southern extremists began to beat the drum for secession. Lincoln promised the South that he would not demand the abolition of slavery, but he warned the secessionists that he would not allow them to split the Union apart. When South Carolina bombarded federal troops at Fort Sumter in Charleston on April 12, 1861, Lincoln issued a call for seventy-five thousand volunteers to help put down what northern politicians called the southern rebellion. During the next four years, while the American Civil War raged on, African Americans played an increasingly important role in the Union cause. Initially forbidden to serve in the Union army, black men waited until the summer of 1862, when Lincoln finally heeded the counsel of advisers like Frederick Douglass and permitted free blacks in liberated portions of Louisiana and South Carolina to form regiments. When two South Carolina regiments, combining both free blacks and former slaves, captured and occupied Jacksonville, Florida, in March 1863, Lincoln decided to engage in the full-scale recruitment of black soldiers for the army. By the war's end, more than 186,000 blacks had served in the artillery, cavalry, engineers, and infantry as well as in the U.S. Navy. Black troops left a notable record of valor in major battles throughout the South in the last two years of the war even though they were routinely paid less than the wages white soldiers received. More than 38,000 African Americans gave their lives for the Union cause.

Although northern whites joined the Union army for many reasons, blacks fought for one overriding purpose—to bring an end to slavery. For more than two years after the outbreak of hostilities, African Americans waited for their president to link the Union cause with the extinction of slavery. When Lincoln issued the Emancipation Proclamation in the summer of 1862, which declared all slaves in the rebellious states to be free as of January 1, 1863, blacks in the North felt that, at long last, their country had committed itself to an ideal worth dying for. Few African Americans criticized Lincoln for failing to declare freedom for the slaves in the border states, such as Kentucky and Maryland, that had not joined the southern confederacy. Charlotte Forten, daughter of an influential Philadelphia civil rights activist and author of the most widely read African American diary of the nineteenth century, probably spoke for most in the black American leadership class when she entered in her diary on January 1, 1863: "Ah, what a grand, glorious day this has been. The dawn of freedom which it heralds may not break upon us at once; but it will surely come, and sooner, I believe, than we have ever dared hope before." When the final surrender came at Appomattox, Virginia, on April 9, 1865, African Americans pressed for the enactment of laws ensuring a new era of freedom and opportunity for every black American. On December 6, 1865, the Thirteenth Amendment to the U.S. Constitution, which abolished "slavery and involuntary servitude" throughout the country, was ratified by the newly united states of America, including eight from the former Confederacy. But the long-anticipated era of freedom, equality, and opportunity for all would prove much more difficult to bring into reality.
LUCY TERRY

C. 1730–1821

Lucy Terry’s only poem, *Bars Fight*, is the earliest known work of literature by an African American. Composed in rhymed tetrameter couplets and probably designed to be sung, Terry’s ballad records an Indian ambush of two white families on August 25, 1746, in a section of Deerfield, Massachusetts, known as “the Bars,” a colonial term for the meadows. Although Terry had grown up a slave in Deerfield, her poem conveys genuine sympathy for the white men and women who died in the fight. The poem was preserved orally in local memory until it was published in Springfield, Massachusetts, in 1855.

Terry was born in Africa, kidnapped as an infant, and sold into slavery in Rhode Island. In 1735, when she was about five years old, she became the property of Ensign Ebenezer Wells of Deerfield, Massachusetts. She was converted to Christianity and became a member of her master’s church in 1744. She remained a slave until Obijah Prince, a wealthy free black, bought her freedom and married her in 1756. In 1760 the Princes moved to Guilford, Vermont, where her reputation as a raconteur and a strong defender of black civil rights grew. Committed to an education for each of her six children, Lucy Terry Prince encouraged her oldest son to apply for admission to Williams College. When he was refused, she traveled to Williamstown, Massachusetts, and delivered a three-hour argument to the college’s trustees against Williams’s policy of racial discrimination. Though unsuccessful, this effort augmented Terry’s regional reputation as a skilled orator. After her husband’s death in 1794, Terry moved to Sunderland, Vermont, where she died in 1821.

**Bars Fight**

August, ’twas the twenty-fifth, 1
Seventeen hundred forty-six, 2
The Indians did in ambush lay,
Some very valiant men to slay,
The names of whom I’ll not leave out:
Samuel Allen like a hero fout, 3
And though he was so brave and bold,
His face no more shall we behold.

Eleazer Hawks was killed outright,
Before he had time to fight,—
Before he did the Indians see,
Was shot and killed immediately.

Oliver Amsden he was slain,
Which caused his friends much grief and pain.
Simeon Amsden they found dead
Not many rods distant from his head.

1. Meadows. 2. Fought.
Adonijah Gillett, we do hear,
Did lose his life which was so dear.
John Sadler fled across the water,
And thus escaped the dreadful slaughter.

Eunice Allen see the Indians coming,
And hopes to save herself by running;
And had not her petticoats stopped her,
The awful creatures had not caught her,
Nor tommy hawked her on the head,
And left her on the ground for dead.
Young Samuel Allen, Oh, lack-a-day!
Was taken and carried to Canada.

1746

OLAUDAH EQUIANO

The Interesting Narrative of the Life of Olaudah Equiano, or Gustavus Vassa, the African, Written by Himself (1789) is widely regarded as the prototype of the slave narrative, a form of autobiography that in the early nineteenth century gained a wide international readership because of its compelling firsthand testimony against slavery. In its bulky two volumes, Olaudah Equiano’s Life tells a richly detailed story of seagoing adventure, spiritual enlightenment, and economic success in England and the Americas. Equiano’s ability to espouse the highest ideals of his era in the language of the everyday man and woman had much to do with the impressive publication record of the Life, which went through thirty-six editions between 1789 and 1857 and was translated into Dutch and German. Equiano’s autobiography was the most influential work of English prose by an African American in the eighteenth century. With Phillis Wheatley’s Poems on Various Subjects, Religious and Moral (1773), the Life of Olaudah Equiano verified the claim, much disputed during the Enlightenment, that blacks could represent themselves effectively through writing. Equiano’s seriousness of purpose, sophisticated self-analysis, and sustained attention to the craft of storytelling have identified his autobiography as an inaugural text of African American letters.

Equiano was not the first African-born former slave to recount his experiences in bondage and freedom. But he was the first to write the story of his life himself, without the aid or direction of white ghostwriters or editors, such as his predecessors in the slave narrative relied on. Equiano’s independence in this regard may be one reason why his story places much more emphasis on the atrocities of slavery and pleads more insistently for its total and immediate abolition than any previous slave narrative. Most slave narrators of Equiano’s era impressed their white sponsors with their piety and their willingness to forgive those who had once oppressed and exploited them. Although Equiano made much of his conversion to Christianity, he made clear his dedication to social change by venting his moral outrage toward slavery and by structuring his story so that freedom, not the consolations of religion, emerges as the top priority of his life in slavery. Equiano’s twin desires at the end of the Life—to become a Christian missionary to Africa and to lobby for an end to the African slave trade—suggest that Christianity and abolitionism, the pursuit of individual and social perfection, go hand in hand. This mating of the spiritual and the