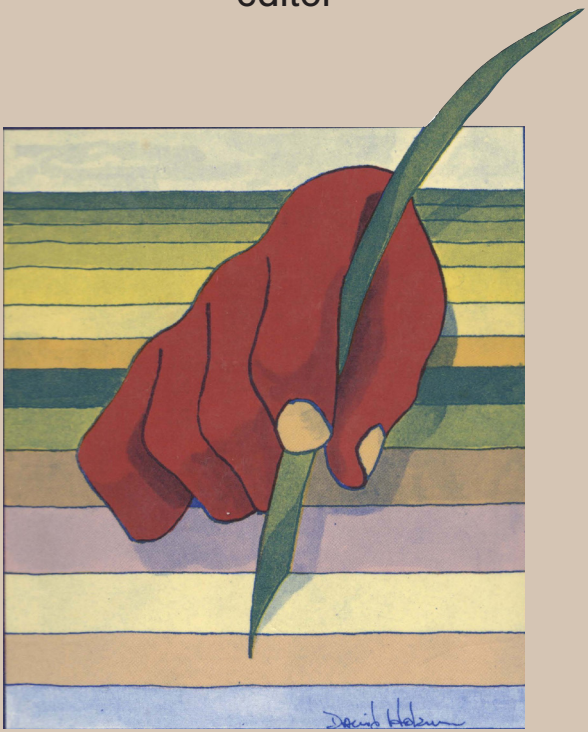
Puttin' on Ole Massa

The Slave Narratives of Henry Bibb, William Wells Brown, and Solomon Northup

Gilbert Osofsky
editor



Advanced Reasoning Forum

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Advanced Reasoning Forum

For my kids, Lisa and Judith,
and all kids who ask why? and how?

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Heart of what slave poured out such melody
As "Steal away to Jesus"? On its strains
His spirit must have nightly floated free,
Though still about his hands he felt his chains.
Who heard great "Jordan roll"? Whose starward eye
Saw chariot "swing low"? And who was he
That breathed that comforting melodic sigh,
"Nobody knows de trouble I see"?

—From "O Black and Unknown Bards,"
by James Weldon Johnson

Contents

Introduction

Puttin' On Ole Massa:

The Significance of Slave Narratives

> "The only weapon of self defence I could use successfully, was that of deception."
>
> *Narrative of the Life and Adventures of Henry Bibb, An American Slave* (New York, 1849), p. 17.

> "Ever after I entertained the first idea of being free, I had endeavored so to conduct myself as not to become obnoxious to the white inhabitants, knowing as I did their power, and their hostility to the colored people. The two points necessary in such a case I had kept constantly in mind. First, I had made no display of the little property or money I possessed, but in every way I wore as much as possible the aspect of slavery. Second, I had never appeared to be even so intelligent as I really was. This all colored people at the south, free and slaves, find it peculiarly necessary for their own comfort and safety to observe."
>
> *The Narrative of Lunsford Lane, Formerly of Raleigh, North Carolina* (Boston, 1848), p. 31.

The slave narratives are tales of bondage and freedom written or told by former slaves. There are many thousands of such narratives if one includes the stories of fugitives collected by antislavery advocates and published in the abolitionist press, or those gathered for publication in nineteenth- and twentieth-century documentary accounts. Brief descriptions of slavery from the mouths of those who lived it appear in many nineteenth-century books, such as William Still's *The Underground Rail Road* (1883), Levi Coffin's *Reminiscences* (1876), Benjamin Drew's *North-Side View of Slavery* (1856), Lydia Maria Child's *Isaac T. Hopper: A True Life* (1854), Wilson Armistead's *A Tribute for the Negro*

(1848). The WPA slave-narrative collection in the Library of Congress runs to seventeen volumes.[1] Perhaps most remarkable of this extensive literature are the four-score full-length autobiographies of slaves published before the Civil War. These books are the main focus of this essay.[2]

A literature so diffuse obviously varies widely in style, purpose, and competence. Some books are works of enduring value from a literary as well as "protest" perspective. The autobiographies of Frederick Douglass, Henry Bibb, and Solomon Northup fuse imaginative style with keenness of insight. They are penetrating and self-critical, superior autobiography by any standards. The quality of mind and spirit of their authors is apparent.

Because the best narratives reflect the imaginative minds of the most gifted and rebellious slaves, their value as reliable sources for the study of slavery has been questioned.[3] To doubt the relevancy of autobiographies written by exceptional slaves, however, is a specious argument in its inception. The great slave narrative, like all great autobiography, is the work of the especially perceptive viewer and writer. In describing his personal life, the sensitive and creative writer touches a deeper reality that transcends his individuality. Frederick Douglass, for example, was certainly an exceptional man, but his autobiography has much to teach us about the slaves around him, his friends and enemies on the plantation and in the city, and many other typical aspects of American slavery. Douglass is gibingly critical of the weaknesses of many of his fellow slaves. He derides those who adopted the master's code of behavior, those who fought for the baubles and goodies used as rewards and bribes, and those who dissipated their energy in wild

[1] Federal Writers' Project, "Slave Narratives: A Folk History of Slavery in the United States from Interviews with Former Slaves" (Typescripts, Washington, D.C., 1941), 17 vols.; Norman R. Yetman, "The Background of the Slave Narrative Collection," *American Quarterly*, XIX (Fall, 1967), 534–553; Benjamin A. Botkin, *Lay My Burden Down: A Folk History of Slavery* (Chicago, 1945).

[2] Two invaluable doctoral dissertations in the field of American literature provide an overview of the subject: Charles H. Nichols, Jr., "A Study of the Slave Narrative" (doctoral dissertation, Brown University, 1948); and Margaret Young Jackson, "An Investigation of Biographies and Autobiographies of American Slaves Published Between 1840 and 1860: Based upon the Cornell Special Slavery Collection (doctoral dissertation, Cornell University, 1954). Each contains a solid bibliography.

[3] This question has arisen with deadening regularity each time I've lectured on the subject. The argument generally made is that men like Douglass were so unusual that their experiences emphasize only the atypical aspects of slavery.

sports and drinking bouts during holidays.[4] Douglass presents a many-sided depiction of the slave experience—his is no papier-mâché book or antislavery tract. The historians who fail to use such a book or the narratives of a Bibb, a Brown, a Northup, or a Samuel Ringgold Ward because they are "exceptional" men might as well argue that Claude Brown and Eldridge Cleaver are unsuitable commentators on today's ghetto. To exclude the "exceptional" is to eliminate all strong autobiography as a distortion of the events of its time. Yet it is these writers whose books are most likely to interpret reality with insight and clarity.

The majority of slave narratives, like most autobiographies, are more parochial and weaker in literary quality. Many are confused. A blatant illustration is the rambling memoir of that delightful character William Grimes ("Old Grimes"), who escaped from Georgia, settled in New Haven, and became a handyman and general factotum to students at Yale. In his poorly organized tales, ends of stories precede beginnings, detailed descriptions of many jobs (horse trader, barber, gambler, waiter, laborer, pimp, grocer) and of his legal difficulties are presented in confusing bits and pieces, and at one juncture an unexplained wife arrives on the scene.[5]

Volumes compiled to raise money in the North for the purchase of relatives in slavery, such as the autobiographies of Lunsford Lane and Noah Davis, were written hurriedly and hawked from door to door.[6] As their books demonstrate, these authors were men of unusual ability and integrity, but they had little time for leisurely reminiscing or training in literary style. Lane, for example, worked around the clock to raise money for the food and freedom of his family. He simultaneously sold tobacco, pipes, and lumber, ran a hauling service, and labored as a domestic. Another author of a narrative, Davis, was a slave shoemaker and preacher who learned letters by copying customers' names from the shoes he repaired and passages from the New Testament. Their life stories abound with accounts of their own response to slavery and the

[4] Frederick Douglass, *Life and Times of Frederick Douglass* (New York, 1962), pp. 145–148.

[5] William Grimes, *Life of William Grimes, the Runaway Slave* (New Haven, 1855).

[6] *The Narrative of Lunsford Lane, Formerly of Raleigh, North Carolina* (Boston, 1848); Rev. Noah Davis, *A Narrative of the Life of Rev. Noah Davis, A Colored Man: Written by Himself, At the Age of Fifty-four* (Baltimore, 1859).

experiences of others. The very shortcomings of their books as literature in part testify to their authenticity as historical sources. The style of their books is a product of their schooling.

A number of slave narratives are of such doubtful validity that they may be shelved at the start. When the authenticity of a "memoir," *The Narrative of James Williams* (1838), dictated by one black man to the Quaker poet John Greenleaf Whittier, was questioned, Williams was nowhere to be found. The book was withdrawn from publication. Williams seems to have been a free Negro who culled stories from neighbors and invented others for a little ready cash. The antislavery press is full of warnings against such bogus fugitives. Two other books, *The Slave: Or the Memoirs of Archie Moore* (1836) and *The Autobiography of a Female Slave* (1856), were works of antislavery fiction.[7] The first was written by the American historian Richard Hildreth; the second was composed by Mattie Griffith, the white daughter of a Kentucky slaveholder. Such potential hoaxes led to careful investigation of the stories fugitives wrote for publication. Narrators were subjected to detailed questioning by committees of knowledgeable people; letters were written to former masters and neighbors for corroboration. A tale so seemingly improbable as the life of Henry Bibb led to an extensive correspondence with white Southerners, all of whom verified Bibb's account—the improbable was the real.[8] Solomon Northup's fantastic experiences were verified by a basketful of legal documents.

Because few slaves were literate enough to write their names, much less their autobiographies, and were thus forced to rely on amanuenses, usually abolitionists, scholars have rightly wondered where the slave's experience began and that of the antislavery recorder left off. Some have maintained that the typical slave narrative is so doctored that all are suspect as sources. Ulrich B. Phillips, for example, believed that most narratives "were issued with so much abolitionist editing that as a class their authenticity is doubtful."[9]

We should be wary of such sweeping generalizations that assign the majority of surviving books to the trash heap. Phillips cited the reminiscences of Josiah Henson as a prime instance of an unreliable

[7] C. H. Nichols, Jr., pp. 1–10.

[8] Henry Bibb, *Narrative of the Life and Adventures of Henry Bibb, An American Slave, Written by Himself* (New York, 1849), pp. i–x.

[9] Ulrich B. Phillips, *Life and Labor in the Old South* (Boston, 1929), p. 219.

slave narrative. My own analysis indicates that in the early editions it is an honest autobiography. Henson became a leader among the fugitives in Canada and received widespread coverage in the anti-slavery press. Many abrasive news stories resulted from his serious break with the Garrisonian abolitionists on the question of emigration to Canada but none questioned the authenticity of his autobiography. Also, the portions of his book that provide descriptions of incidents of his public career have proved authentic when checked against other sources.[10] In one of the most jolting passages in the slave-narrative literature, Henson describes how he, as a black driver, transported an entire group of fellow slaves through free territory in Ohio to a Kentucky plantation. He was repeatedly told all were legally free as soon as they touched Ohio soil, and crowds of free blacks in Cincinnati tried to convince him to remain—some showered him with curses—yet Henson pushed on, convinced that his integrity and self-esteem required him to do his master's bidding. "My pride was aroused in view of the importance of my responsibility, and heart and soul I became identified with my master's project of running off his negroes," he wrote. When Henson became a free man he admitted a deep sense of guilt in having obeyed these orders. Few men have had better cause to assign such disagreeable memories to the furthest reaches of their minds; yet this story, in all its hideous candor, is recorded in Josiah Henson's memoir. No scholarly or social purpose is served by assuming such narratives, *a priori*, to be unreliable sources.[11]

The most obviously false accounts readily give themselves away. The Preface to the life of the militant black abolitionist and fugitive slave J. W. Loguen, for example, relates how the author who recorded Loguen's experiences invented transitional incidents to tie together what seemed to him a disjointed account.[12] He gave an appearance of coherence to his story and destroyed its credibility in the process. Elleanor Eldridge's amanuensis, after the manner of third-rate contemporary fiction, spiced her book with imaginary and gushy romances. Innumerable paragraphs exhort the reader to sympathize with the trials of the lowly as they would with the meander-

[10] See the following issues of *The Liberator*, which deal with many aspects of his career and also include descriptions of his journeys to England, which coincide with materials in the autobiography: April 11, November 7, 1851; July 2, 1852; June 11, 1858.

[11] Josiah Henson, *Father Henson's Story of His Own Life* (Boston, 1858), pp. 48–54.

[12] *The Rev. J. W. Loguen as a Slave and as a Freeman: A Narrative of Real Life* (Syracuse, New York, 1859), p. iv.

ings of kings and queens.[13] In other lurid tales of suffering and woe and torture, cruelty after shocking cruelty appears with such deadening regularity that one easily recognizes the presence of a morality play, not the record of a human life. What the nineteenth century called "shame-shame" is pervasive in many narratives. Such clearly false or doctored accounts are excluded from this essay.

Nevertheless, the simple stories of slave life in most narratives, with their unembroidered descriptions of plantation activities, camp meetings in the woods, and many other aspects of daily routine, are striking in the consistency of themes that appear among individuals who lived on widely separated plantations, in different states, and in different decades. A coherent pattern of slave life emerges in these diverse testimonies, yet most of our present historical accounts of slavery exclude or underestimate the significance of these themes. Our histories have been written primarily from the surviving manuscript records of slaveholders and therefore tend to reflect the concerns and biases of the master caste. The witnesses who wrote or dictated narratives must be heeded if a balanced account of the history of slavery in the United States is to be written.

II

To understand the narrative literature it is important to keep in mind the relative ease of *occasional* escape from the plantation. The narratives are replete with stories of slaves who ran off to hide in woods and swamps, thereby escaping slavery for at least some portion of their lives. The frequency of such stories in slave autobiographies makes clear that running away was a common means of black protest and rebellion against slavery.

Repeatedly slaves speak of leaving in fear of sale or transportation to the Deep South, or as a means of protest against unusually brutal and unjustified physical punishment, or in an attempt to find friends, husbands, wives, children, and parents who were sold to a new master or sent to a different section of the country. It was not only possible for slaves to escape and hide out for long periods of

[13] *Memoirs of Elleanor Eldridge* (Providence, 1847).

time, but the more skillful could also remain away almost as long as they chose. All the narrators are wise in the ways of nature, knowledgeable in animal lore and in techniques for foraging and living off the land. They often arranged to contact friends and family on the plantation to supply them with food on secret visits.

Many stories illustrate these themes. One was recorded by Lewis W. Paine, a white man, who was sent to prison for trying to help Samson, a giant slave, escape from Georgia:

> When [Samson] stayed out as long as he wished, he would send word to master that he would "come in," provided he would not punish him. . . . No one knew where he was, except a few of his faithful companions. He kept hid during the day, only venturing out at night, in order to procure necessary supplies. He was out about three months before he came to me. Those who are not acquainted with southern life will think this strange. But it not infrequently happens that they stay out for years in that way. There are large tracts of land, covered with heavy timber, containing not only deep and unpenetrable swamps, but caves, holes, shelving rocks and banks. In these they secrete themselves during the daytime, venturing abroad only by night, in pursuit of food, and such articles as they may need, or to see their brother slaves who they can trust. If they intend to "stay out" long, they prepare some way to cook, and by taking fowls, and once in a while a pig, they make out very well. . . . But if they are going to tarry long, they depend on such things as they can get, or others may give them.[14]

A Louisiana slave told of a fugitive who hid in a large hole in a dense forest. He gathered trees, leaves, and branches to protect himself not only from discovery but from storms and wild beasts. (A number of narrators allude to coming upon packs of wolves.) The fugitive clubbed birds and animals to obtain food and occasionally slipped back to the plantation where his mother gathered provisions for him. He continued to live in this manner "until freedom came" and finally emerged from the forest so covered with hair that he looked to others like the animals among whom he had lived so long.[15]

John Little, who later became a successful farmer in Canada,

[14] Lewis W. Paine, *Six Years in a Georgia Prison* (New York, 1851), pp. 28–29. See also Kenneth M. Stampp, *The Peculiar Institution: Slavery in the Ante-Bellum South* (New York, 1956), pp. 109–124.

[15] James B. Cade, "Out of the Mouths of Ex-Slaves," *Journal of Negro History*, XXII (April, 1935), 322.

stayed in the woods for two years. A powerful slave, Aaron, avoided being captured for a year. Another slave named Aaron Siddles hid out for five months. William Street hid for eight months. Another lived in the woods for five years before capture by a patrol—and then escaped again.[16] Moses Roper, the slave son of a plantation owner who once ran away to find his mother after being flogged, said, "It must be recollected that when a person is two miles from a house, in that part of the country, that he can hide himself in the woods for weeks, and I knew a slave who hid for six months without discovery, the trees being so thick." Roper later slipped out of bondage on a merchant ship.[17] Fugitive John Thompson wrote that few slaves of his acquaintance knew of "the friendly guidance of the north star" but all were aware of the potential tactical value of swamps and bushes.[18] Henry Bibb, an escape artist equal to Houdini who seemed able to come and go almost at his own discretion, put the case neatly when he said, "Among other good trades I learned the art of running away to perfection. I made a regular business of it, and never gave it up. . . ."[19]

One of the most illustrious slaves in American history, Nat Turner, took to the woods after his revolt collapsed and devised ingenious ways of avoiding capture. He burrowed into the earth, skillfully camouflaged his hideout with materials gathered in the forest, found ways to round up food, and emerged only at night. Though the entire slave South was on the lookout for him, Turner lived in this way—comfortably, he said—for about eight weeks. He was finally discovered by accident when a hunting dog strayed into his hideaway for a piece of meat. If Nat Turner could remain hidden for so long with an army of searchers on his trail, less valuable prey had an even better chance to go undetected.[20]

[16] Benjamin Drew, *The Refugee, or the Narratives of Fugitive Slaves in Canada: A Northside View of Slavery* (Boston, 1856), *passim*. The story of the slave out for five years is in *The Liberator*, October 1, 1852.

[17] Moses Roper, *A Narrative of the Adventures of Moses Roper . . . .* (London, 1840), p. 59.

[18] John Thompson, *The Life of John Thompson, a Fugitive Slave: Containing His History of Twenty-five Years in Bondage, and His Providential Escape* (Worcester, Mass., 1856), pp. 27–28.

[19] Henry Bibb, p. 15.

[20] *The Confession, Trial and Execution of Nat Turner, The Negro Insurgent* (Washington, D.C., 1910), pp. 13–14.

The relative ease of occasional escape *within* the plantation South must be contrasted with the difficulty of escape to freedom in the North. Narrators tell us that most slaves on plantations lacked a sense of geography and a knowledge of the outside world. Even a man as inquisitive as Frederick Douglass admitted that there was a time in his life when he hadn't heard of the North; he learned about the abolitionists only by accident.[21] One of John Brown's admirers and followers, James Redpath, who interviewed numbers of slaves, expressed amazement at their lack of geographical knowledge. Redpath met slaves who had never heard of Europe, did not know their own states, and could not tell him the terminus of the railroad that ran by their own locality.[22]

When a Boston visitor asked Henry Watson why he didn't try to leave the plantation, Watson "told him, with a laugh, I knew not where to go. . . . He informed me of . . . the great anti-slavery movement . . . a subject which I was entirely ignorant of before. . . ."[23] When Leonard Black landed in New York City he asked a man if there was such a place as Boston. "I was so ignorant I knew not whether Boston was a State or city," Black recorded. "In fact, I scarcely knew there was such a place. Slavery is as ill adapted for obtaining this kind of knowledge as all other kinds."[24] Henry Banks recalled he heard of a free country "somewhere" but wasn't sure where it was.[25] When the kidnaped Peter Still returned to Philadelphia after a lifetime of slavery, he was told by his brother, black abolitionist William Still, that their mother lived in New Jersey and they would go together to visit her. Peter hesitated to believe him because he had never heard of New Jersey.[26] On Henry Bibb's first escape he was befriended by a black man in Cincinnati who said the abolitionists would help transport him to Canada. Bibb was unbelieving: "This was the first time in my life that ever I had heard of such people," he wrote. "I supposed that

[21] Frederick Douglass, pp. 81–87.

[22] James Redpath, *The Roving Editor: Or, Talks with Slaves in the Southern States* (New York, 1859), pp. 65–66, and *passim.*

[23] Henry Watson, *Narrative of Henry Watson: A Fugitive Slave* (Boston, 1848), p. 34.

[24] Leonard Black, *The Life and Sufferings of Leonard Black: A Fugitive from Slavery* (New Bedford, Mass., 1847), pp. 33–34.

[25] *The Refugee,* pp. 75–76.

[26] Kate E. R. Pickard, ed., *The Kidnapped and the Ransomed: Being the Personal Recollections of Peter Still and His Wife 'Vina,' After Forty Years of Slavery* (Syracuse, New York, 1856), pp. 247–251.

they were a different race. . . ." Bibb aptly called slavery "the graveyard of the mind."[27]

Many narrators blame such ignorance on practiced deceit by their masters; they argued that the master caste consciously exploited slave ignorance and gullibility for its own advantage. There is abundant evidence in the narratives to demonstrate at least the partial truth of that charge. One slave asked his master who abolitionists were, and was told that they rounded up slaves for sale in Deep South markets.[28] One of Harriet Tubman's major tasks during the Civil War was to counsel plantation blacks that it was safe to board Northern gunboats.[29] Numbers of slaves had been encouraged to believe that Yankees were cannibals who looked upon them as tasty morsels. The memoirs of the sharp-witted Lewis Clarke record a convincing illustration of this fear.

> I will not forget all the horrid stories slaveholders tell about Canada [Clarke wrote]. They assured the slave that, when they get hold of slaves in Canada, they make various uses of them. Sometimes they *skin* the *head,* and wear the wool on their coat collars—put them into the lead-mines, with both eyes out—the young slaves they eat; as for the red coats, they are sure death to the slave. However ridiculous to a well-informed person such stories may appear, they work powerfully upon the excited imagination of an ignorant slave.[30]

Leonard Black said derisively that "Slaves are taught ignorance as we teach our children knowledge."[31]

In the deepest sense the entire South was a prison house, and all white men, solely because of their skin color, were prison keepers.[32] By law and custom every white was permitted to stop any black along the road and ask him to present his pass or freedom papers or explain why he was away from the plantation. To collect the reward on a fugitive or perhaps claim the person of a slave whose master could not be located must have been enticing bait for the poor whites who patrolled the Southern countryside. A good

[27] Henry Bibb, pp. 50–51.

[28] *The Kidnapped and the Ransomed,* p. 247.

[29] Sarah Hopkins Bradford, *Scenes in the Life of Harriet Tubman* (Auburn, New York, 1869), pp. 38–41.

[30] *Narratives of the Sufferings of Lewis and Milton Clarke, Sons of a Soldier of the Revolution. . . .* (Boston, 1846), pp. 40–41.

[31] Leonard Black, pp. 50–51.

[32] The prison analogy is also used in George M. Frederickson and Christopher Lasch, "Resistance to Slavery," *Civil War History,* XIII (December, 1967), 315–329.

catch not only seemed a fulfillment of one's communal responsibility but also might mean instant wealth. The most thrilling passages of slave autobiographies deal with strategies fugitives used for handling or avoiding such confrontations with whites. Andrew Jackson wrote that he "learned to look on every white man as my foe, and dared not pass near to any one."[33] Lewis Clarke described slave anxiety in even contemplating escape to the North: "All the white part of mankind, that he [the slave] has ever seen, are enemies to him and all his kindred. How can he venture where none but white faces shall greet him?"[34]

Further, slaves had to avoid "guards," both black and white. Most slaves and free blacks in the narratives were willing to assist fugitives, but certain black Judases sabotaged the escape plans of many. Henry Bibb's schemes were exposed at least four times by black traitors; the escape plans of Leonard Black, Frederick Douglass, and John Little were revealed by fellow Negroes, Black's by his closest friend. Little was betrayed by a free black who received a ten-dollar reward for his service. James Adams of Virginia said he feared to tell even his father and mother of his plans to leave.[35]

The escape of three slaves as described by black Garrisonian William Wells Brown to the New England Anti-Slavery Society was a dramatic example of such treachery. One of the three, who was nearly white, had impersonated the master of the other two, but when they had traveled far away from home territory, the white slave claimed the other two as his property and sold them. "He had not black blood enough in him to make him honest!" Brown said.[36] When free blacks captured such men they took care of business. One black worker in the employ of Southern slaveholders was tarred and feathered in Washington, Pennsylvania.[37] Another from Kentucky was bombarded with boulders and brickbats in Detroit and finally locked in prison for his own safety. "Kill him," "murder the villain," the crowds shouted. One powerful black woman said she was determined to have "his heart's blood."[38]

The dominant mechanisms of control in the slave society made

[33] *Narrative and Writings of Andrew Jackson of Kentucky* (Syracuse, 1847), p. 15.
[34] *Narratives of Lewis and Milton Clarke*, p. 31.
[35] Leonard Black, pp. 22, 25, 29; *The Refugee*, pp. 19, 205.
[36] *The Liberator*, June 4, 1858.
[37] *Ibid.*, August 29, 1856.
[38] *Ibid.*, September 17, 1858.

possible a social system which permitted a measure of occasional freedom. If the experiences of slave narrators are in the least way typical, large numbers of slaves were on the move from Saturday night through Sunday and during such holidays as Easter, Christmas, and July Fourth. These were times to visit wives, husbands, lovers, children, and friends on neighboring plantations. This leniency of control acted as a necessary emotional outlet for the entire regime. The master caste would not have permitted such wanderings unless it could be certain that the man or woman who departed Saturday night would be back in the quarters the next day. "It becomes a matter of mutual interest for each [master] to protect his neighbor's 'rights' in order to render his own more secure," the black Andrew Jackson commented. Whenever he passed whites along a road, Jackson was asked: "Where do you belong, nigger?" "Whose boy are you?" "Where are you going, nigger?"[39] Another slave said that under these conditions "it is almost a matter of impossibility for a slave to escape."[40]

This barrier to escape poses a limitation of the use of slave narratives as sources. Most though not all of the books were written by men and women who were closest to free territory and who escaped from the Border States, not the Deep South: few escaped permanently from plantations in Louisiana, Mississippi, and Alabama. Solomon Northup, Henry Watson, Peter Still, and Henry Bibb all describe parts of their lives spent in the heartland of the cotton-producing South, but these accounts are not typical. It is unfortunate for comparative purposes that we have so few descriptions of slavery as slaves saw it in the Deep South. The efficient slave control that choked off routes of escape also blocked history's access to full understanding of black bondage in America.

Successful fugitives passed through chinks in the wall of the closed society. It was an article of lore, repeated in most slave autobiographies, that the best time to plan a permanent escape was on a Saturday night or during some holiday when slaves were on the move on visits and fugitives were, therefore, least likely to be detected. Even to conceive the possibility of escape under these conditions required a special quality of mind: imagination, independ-

[39] *Narrative of Andrew Jackson*, p. 10.

[40] *Narrative of Henry Watson*, p. 32. Note the similar comment of Philip Younger in *The Refugee*, p. 249: "Escape from Alabama is almost impossible,–if a man escapes, it is by the skin of his teeth."

ence, cunning, daring, and a sense of self-pride. It required a strategic appearance of obedience to their masters, like seeming most satisfied at the moment they were most discontented. ("At that time, of all times, he must appear best satisfied with slavery, least anxious for freedom. . . .")[41] It called for the use of subtle psychological weapons. It demanded all the shrewdness and practiced deceit one finds in such abundance in the rich folklore of Old John, the symbolic slave hero who mastered the art of tricking "Ole Massa," of fooling him, of "puttin' him on."

III

The narratives permit a measure of access to the privacy of the mind of a slave and the conversations that took place in the slave cabin. No adequate analysis can be made of the much debated question of the impact of slavery on the personalities of bondsmen without hearing the stories slaves told one another when their owners were not around. As such they are crucial evidence of the ideas that passed through a slave's consciousness, his mind, if not his mouth. Such stories, crammed with aggressive humor—and wit is one of mankind's most useful aggressive tools[42]—reveal the difficulty of enslaving a man's mind as one has enslaved his body. Lewis Clarke, a slave who recorded much of this inside humor, said he would not vouch for the truth of many anecdotes, but they were tales "slaves delight to tell each other."[43] Many of the tales are surely apocryphal in a technical sense—they probably refer to things slaves wished to say as well as to the things they said.

Some slaves undoubtedly felt loyalty and affection for their owners, but the stories of fugitives describe even this relationship as one of ambivalence. Slaves often held two overlapping attitudes: a willingness to accept life with an owner who treated them fairly,

[41] Samuel Ringgold Ward, *Autobiography of A Fugitive Negro: His Anti-Slavery Labours in the United States, Canada and England* (London, 1855), p. 162.

[42] Sigmund Freud, "Wit and Its Relation to the Unconscious," in Dr. A. A. Brill, ed., *The Basic Writings of Sigmund Freud* (New York, 1938), pp. 697–702; Donald C. Simmons, "Protest Humor: Folkloristic Reaction to Prejudice," *American Journal of Psychiatry*, CXX (December 1963), 567–570.

[43] *Narratives of Lewis and Milton Clarke*, p. 114.

an *entente cordiale* rather than a feeling of serious devotion; and a private sense of irreverence for many of their master's ideas. This irreverence was the subject of much slave humor.

Peter Randolph, one of sixty-six slaves emancipated on the death of their owner, told a story he had overheard on his plantation in Virginia. The following conversation is said to have occurred between the slave Pompey and his master, as the slaveowner prepared to fight a duel:[44]

> Pompey, how do I look?
> O, massa, mighty.
> What do you mean "mighty," Pompey?
> Why, massa, you look noble.
> What do you mean by "noble"?
> Why, sar, you just look like one *lion.*
> Why, Pompey, where have you ever seen a lion?
> I see one down in yonder field the other day, massa.
> Pompey, you foolish fellow, that was a *jackass.*
> Was it, massa? Well you look just like him.

It is quite unlikely that this confrontation took place as Pompey remembered it, but it is not unreasonable to assume that he wished it had, or thought of saying such things, or told other slaves like Randolph that he had replied in this manner. That the slaves told such stories to one another is a clue to their state of mind—and there are numbers of similar examples in the narrative literature.

Lewis Clarke of Kentucky recalled meeting two slaves sent out to dig a grave for their departed owner and recounted their conversation at the gravesite:

> Two slaves were sent out to dig a grave for old master. They dug it very deep. As I passed by I asked Jess and Bob what in the world they dug it so deep for. It was down six or seven feet. I told them there would be a fuss about it, and they had better fill it up some. Jess said it suited him exactly. Bob said he would not fill it up; he wanted to get the old man as near *home* as possible. When we got a stone to put on his grave, we hauled the largest we could find, so as to fasten him down as strong as possible.[45]

[44] Quoted in Margaret Young Jackson, pp. 232–233.
[45] Quoted in *ibid.*, pp. 234–235.

And another from North Carolina, remembered by Lunsford Lane: One evening, Derby, a slave of the state treasurer, passed by to tell of the funeral of another respected state officer. The family of the deceased was greatly pleased that Derby had voluntarily placed crape on his hat as a sign of mourning—"they thought it envinced great consideration for the family and friends, and for which he deserved great praise." Derby told his black friends that his motives were misunderstood and "he would be glad to have kept it upon his hat until they were all as decently placed beneath the sod as Secretary White, if that would aid him in securing his freedom."[46]

Slaves on Solomon Northup's Louisiana plantation referred to their master privately as "hogeye" and "hogjaw"—[47] hardly terms of endearment. Another slave, "Faithful Jack," recalled a supposed conversation he had with his master at the deathbed. "Farewell, massa!" he told his buddies he had said. "Pleasant journey: you soon be dere, massa—[it's] all de way down hill!"[48] Others remembered refusing to be buried in the same grave as their owners in fear of the devil, "Old Sam," taking the wrong body.[49]

The ultimate in irreverences was the occasional letter fugitives sent to former masters after they had successfully "taken the long walk." Jackson Whitney made his "feet feel for Canada" when his master attempted to sell him after having previously agreed to let Whitney buy himself out of slavery. Whitney told William Riley, his former master, that he could now put his "conscience in his pocket"—a variation of the expression "to put a slave in one's pocket," which meant "to sell a slave." The slave informed his previous owner that he was now working for another fugitive from Kentucky whose farm was large, productive, and "so level that there are not hills enough on it to hide a dog. . . ." The country was not cold and barren, as he had been told, but beautiful and fertile. Whitney only wished his master could see how enjoyable his life was. He also said he knew the Lord would punish Riley for forcing him to abandon his family. The letter concluded: "You must not

[46] Rev. William G. Hawkins, ed., *Lunsford Lane or Another Helper from North Carolina* (Boston, 1863), p. 84.

[47] *Twelve Years A Slave: Narrative of Solomon Northup* (New York, 1853), pp. 197, 220.

[48] Quoted in Margaret Young Jackson, pp. 304–305.

[49] *Narratives of Lewis and Milton Clarke*, p. 119.

consider that it is a slave talking to 'massa' now, but one as free as yourself. . . . I pretended all the time that I thought you or some one else had a better right to me than I had to myself, which, you know, is rather hard thinking."[50]

A slave who settled in Windsor, Canada West, wrote her mistress that she loved the white children she had nursed so faithfully but she appreciated "breathing free air" more. When safely out of the country, a young man returned by mail the keys to his master's storehouse.[51] Milton Clarke taunted his owner with a note from Oberlin telling him not to worry too much about his ex-slave or the loss of the two hundred dollars a year Clarke paid him for the right to hire his own time (find self-employment): "he had found by experience he had wit enough to take care of himself, and he thought the care of his master was not worth the two hundred dollars a year which he had been paying for it, for four years; that, on the whole, if his master would be quiet and contented, he thought he should do very well."[52]

IV

A considerable portion of most slave narratives deals with the methods of escape. The narrative literature probably acquired some of its popularity in the 1840's and 1850's because of the excitement of these tales. The melodrama and romance of the escape —the elements that Harriet Beecher Stowe skillfully weaves into *Uncle Tom's Cabin*—are less significant, however, than the evidence of the demands of courage and imagination required for execution of a successful escape plan. Such shrewdness and guile were characteristic of slave response in other less dramatic aspects of the plantation experience. For many slaves deception was a socially useful weapon of survival.

A number of the most impressive stories of practiced deceit deal with stealing food. As Eugene D. Genovese has shown in his brilliant analysis of the plantation economy, it was difficult to sup-

[50] *The Weekly Anglo-African*, July 23, 1859.
[51] *The Liberator*, January 5, 1855.
[52] *Narratives of Lewis and Milton Clarke*, pp. 47–48.

ply bondsmen with a nutritionally balanced diet that would satisfy the body needs of hard-working laborers.[53] Slaves who were hungry, therefore, stole food; others undoubtedly also found thieving satisfying as a form of aggression and revenge. Inventiveness was necessary if one was to avoid detection. Aunt Peggy, for example, was an artist at stealing little pigs. One day the "Philistines were upon her" as she was boiling her catch in a large kettle. Peggy put a door on the kettle, seated her daughter on the door, covered the young girl with a heavy quilt, and told the inquisitive overseer the child had a heavy cold and was taking a steam bath. Andrew Jackson described how slaves stole pigs, skinned possums, buried the pig's hide, and told anyone who asked that they were eating possum. Others stole turkeys and chickens but left enough feathers scattered about to make it appear the foxes had done it. Some stole potatoes and drove hogs into the field and called master to show him all the damage the animals had done. There are literally hundreds of such tales in the narratives.[54]

Cunning and intelligence had to be concealed. Numbers of slaves who appeared *too intelligent* were sometimes difficult to sell: they were assumed to be troublesome. A man as perceptive and enterprising as Lunsford Lane devoted as much effort to hiding his abilities as he did to raising money to buy his family out of slavery. Lane always wore shabby clothing and looked very poor, as he hid every penny he earned. He told no one but his wife how much money he had saved.

> Ever after I entertained the first idea of being free [Lane explained], I had endeavored so to conduct myself as not to become obnoxious to the white inhabitants, knowing as I did their power, and their hostility to the colored people. The two points necessary in such a case I had kept constantly in mind. First, I had made no display of the little property or money I possessed, but in every way I wore as much as possible the aspect of slavery. Second, I had

[53] Eugene D. Genovese, *The Political Economy of Slavery: Studies in the Economy and Society of the Slave South* (New York, 1965), pp. 44–46.

[54] "The slaves on Col. A's plantation had to provide and prepare the supper for the expected vast 'turn out,' which was no light matter; and as slaves like on such occasions to pattern as much as possible after their master's family, the result was, to meet the emergency of the case, they *took*, without saving, 'by your leave, sir,' some property belonging to their master, reasoning among themselves, as slaves often do, that it can not be *stealing*, because 'it belongs to massa, and so do we. . . .'" Steward, *Twenty-two Years a Slave*, p. 29. Charles H. Nichols, Jr., pp. 123–124; Narrative of Andrew Jackson, pp. 27–28; Ward, *Autobiography of a Fugitive*, pp. 175–177; *Narrative of Solomon Northup*, pp. 129–130.

never appeared to be even so intelligent as I really was. This all colored people at the south, free and slaves, find it peculiarly necessary for their own comfort and safety to observe.[55]

Some of the best stories of artifice were told by Solomon Northup. As a black driver, he once supervised the punishment of three slaves caught stealing melons. When the master drove off for a while Northup released his captives from the stocks but made sure they were back before the slave owner returned. "Aha! Ye haven't been strolling about much to-day," the master said when he came back. Northup was so dexterous in the use of a whip he was able to throw the lash within a "hair's breadth of the back, the ear, the nose, without . . . touching them." He pretended to flog, and the slaves acted as though they were seriously injured: "Uncle Abram, with an appearance of honesty peculiar to himself, would declare roundly I had just whipped them worse than General Jackson whipped the enemy at New-Orleans."[56]

References to a secret slave communications system appear in many narratives. Some, like Douglass, talk of double meanings in songs, but most just mention the fact that the system existed. Andrew Jackson wrote that slaves "have a means of communication with each other, altogether unknown to their masters, or to the people of the free states." John Thompson said the same thing. The fugitive blacksmith who became one of the most influential black clergymen in the North, J. W. C. Pennington, wrote: "The telegraph, which by the speed of lightning carries news from one end of this land to another, does not more certainly report news than the slaves do one to another."[57]

One slave said a "lie is often so useful to them, and the truth so often disastrous, and their aptness at a lie is such, that they take in sustaining it an air of assurance and tranquility which imposes on strangers. . . ."[58] Henry Bibb, the undoubted master of them all, repeatedly described deception as his only armor: "The only weapon of self defence that I could use successfully, was that of deception. It is useless for a poor slave, to resist the white man in a

[55] *Narrative of Lunsford Lane*, p. 31.

[56] *Narrative of Solomon Northup*, pp. 129–130, 226–227.

[57] *Narrative of Andrew Jackson*, p. 15; *Life of John Thompson*, pp. 62–63; J. W. C. Pennington, *A Narrative of Events of the Life of J. H. Banks, An Escaped Slave, From the Cotton State of Alabama, in America* (Liverpool, 1861), p. 20; *Scenes in the Life of Harriet Tubman*, p. 40.

[58] *Narrative of Andrew Jackson*, p. 29.

slaveholding State. Public opinion and the law is against him; and resistance in many cases is death to the slave, while the law declares, that he shall submit or die."[59]

Thieving and deception as forms of aggression seem to be normal human responses to unjust treatment and confinement; one finds them beyond the limits of the southern plantation. A fascinating parallel development took place among Americans of Japanese descent in their years of imprisonment in so-called "relocation centers" during World War II. Here was an ethnic group that historically put the highest premium on honesty, that ritualized just standards of public behavior, that had the lowest rates of criminality of all minority groups not only in the United States but in Hawaii and Canada as well. In the psychic pressure cooker of mass imprisonment, however, traditional forms of behavior simply evaporated. In one desert camp at Poston, Arizona, building materials were stolen with abandon. Lumber was taken from contractors, wire was clipped from refrigerators, cement was robbed from the stockpile of items used to build a school. The longer the Japanese were incarcerated the bolder their pillaging became.

And the explanations they used to define their behavior were similar to those used by slaves. The Japanese-Americans insisted they were only "borrowing" items that justly belonged to them; that they were wards of the government and entitled to a fairer share of government services; that the people as well as the physical material might both be looked upon as "property" of the government and therefore incapable of theft from one another. "The residents, with their tongues in their cheeks called this 'borrowing,'" a historian of Poston recorded, "and rationalized that the material had been bought for their use, so they were not really stealing, but only putting it to a more immediate purpose. . . ."[60]

When the Canadian-Japanese community was forcibly uprooted in the same years about half the population was resettled in abandoned mining villages and refurbished ghost towns. Here too traditional social controls and mores underwent rapid and radical change. The Japanese immigrants had historically prided themselves on taking care of their own economic needs, of avoiding public charity and

[59] *Narrative of Henry Bibb*, p. 17.

[60] Alexander Leighton, *The Governing of Men: General Principles and Recommendations Based on Experience at a Japanese Relocation Camp* (Princeton, New Jersey, 1945), p. 148.

institutions. In all the countries to which the Japanese migrated it was customary for them to contribute more money to community funds than they ever withdrew from them. In the Canadian "interior settlements," the ghost towns, these standard social values were reversed. A premium was placed on cunning, cheating and deception. As public expenditures were adjusted to income, many Japanese refused to make honest disclosures of their wages and savings; they took an "exceedingly hostile" view to all government officials and argued that the government was responsible for their plight and therefore had to assume the burden of their maintenance. "In pre-evacuation days it was considered a disgrace for a Japanese to accept relief," sociologist Forrest E. La Violette wrote. "With evacuation, acceptance was made easy by the belief that such help was owed them by the government, and if it were denied to them, the applicants would become extremely hostile."[61]

Fugitive slaves honed the art of pretense into a sharp-edged tool of self-defense. There are innumerable stories of women who pretended to be men and men who made wigs of horses' manes to dress as women, or wore false beards. An amazing use of disguises permitted William and Ellen Craft to get to Boston, and their story became familiar throughout the North.[62] Numbers of light-skinned slaves passed for whites, some audaciously stopping at the best restaurants and hotels to exchange gossip on the price of land, cotton, and slaves. A man like Douglass simply pretended to be free and got away with it.

A number of fugitives—some successfully, others not—used elaborate devices to escape. Some had themselves packed in crates or barrels and shipped north. One man tied himself to the underside of a night passenger train. Those pursued by bloodhounds sometimes put red pepper on their limbs or dug into graves and used the dust on their bodies to throw off their human scent. A fugitive in desperate need of a skiff tore off a wooden gate and floated down a river. Some intentionally asked directions of suspicious whites and made sure to go the opposite way. Slaves in port towns stowed away on ships. John Little and his wife traveled only at night and were so afraid to light a fire they ate only raw meat.

[61] Forrest E. La Violette, *The Canadian Japanese and World War II: A Sociological and Psychological Account* (Toronto, 1948), p. 106.

[62] William Craft, *Running a Thousand Miles for Freedom, or the Escape of William and Ellen Craft from Slavery* (London, 1860).

One group of fugitives escaped in the winter on a sleigh. Forced to ford a stream, they dismantled the sleigh and built a makeshift bridge. Stories of daring and courage were legion. William Johnson refused to turn back, despite frostbitten feet, until he was safe in Canada. Numbers of men who carried pistols and bowie knives vowed to kill anyone who tried to stop them. Some fought desperately for their lives when confronted; one man cut open his captors with a scythe. Men who escaped to the North sometimes returned for their wives, and at least one woman came back for her husband.[63]

A number of sensitive antebellum commentators recognized their courage and hailed the fugitives as men of great imagination and valor. "They are among the heroes of our age," Charles Sumner wrote. "Romance has no stories of more thrilling interest than theirs. Classical antiquity has preserved no examples of adventurous trial more worthy of renown."[64]

Thomas Wentworth Higginson declared that it was his solemn conviction, from

> years of intercourse with fugitive slaves, that if the truth could be fairly told to-day, we white Anglo-Saxons on this continent must yield the palm of native heroism to the negro. I tell you, that if you had seen and heard the things some of us have seen and heard you would think so too. . . . Go among the thousands of refugees in Canada, hear their simple story, talk with the men and women, learn what they have gone through in their efforts to escape, seven times seven repeated, more than once, and you will learn of courage which puts to shame the puny efforts of us who call ourselves men of courage here and now. There is not a great deed in history, there is not an act of self-devotion . . . there is not one single item in the long catalogue of self-consecration in the ages which I cannot match with some act as heroic and noble, done by an African. . . .[65]

In an essay titled "Physical Courage" for the *Atlantic Monthly* Higginson further explored the theme.

> These men and women, who have tested their courage in the lonely

[63] The antislavery press recorded these stories in each issue. My examples are from *The Liberator*, July 11, 1851; September 3, October 1, 1852; August 19, 1853; January 5, 19, 1855; April 4, May 9, October 3, 1856; June 19, September 11, 1857; August 27, 1858; March 25, 1859; April 27, 1860; and also *The Refugee*, *passim.*, for numerous others.

[64] *The Liberator*, October 22, 1852.

[65] *Ibid.*, May 28, 1858.