
The American Biographies and Slavery Narration

For centuries, slave narratives have been ignored by literary scholars and historians, and according to John Sekora, it wasn't until the era after World War II that historians reevaluated their position on these early examples of African American literature (Sekora 482). Until that point, these narratives were "disclaimed as misleading, inaccurate, or tainted,"—somehow unworthy of being taken seriously (Sekora 482). Contemporary historians have scrutinized these narratives, and as Sekora notes, the slave narratives' "factual validity and authenticity" have been proven (Sekora 483).

In Sekora's essay, "Black Message/White Envelope: Genre, Authenticity, and Authority in the Antebellum Slave Narrative," he argues that slave narratives aren't truly a subgenre of autobiography due to the circumstances in which they were written. His arguments have been evaluated by Robert S. Levine, who responded with an essay titled "The slave narrative and the revolutionary tradition of American autobiography." In this essay, Levine refuses this definition of slave narratives, raising critical questions raised by Sekora's argument.

I agree with Levine's argument that the literary tradition of slave narratives should fall into the category of autobiography. Slave narratives earn their place as a subgenre of autobiography simply because they were written by their subjects and they detail events that shaped the lives of their writers. Slave narratives are some of the earliest examples of African American literature in our history, and whether or not their writing was influenced by a white audience does not discredit them.

In his essay, Sekora reasons that slave narratives are not a subgenre of autobiography for multiple reasons, stating first the definition of an autobiography:

Traditionalists and post-structuralists agree that autobiography comes into being when recollection engages memory. Recollection engages people, things, events seemingly fragmented and unrelated; as an essential part of its activity, recollection brings sequence and/or relation to the enormous diversity of experience; it plots the stages of the subject's journey to selfhood. Meaning emerges when events are connected as parts of a coherent and comprehensive whole. (Sekora 509)

This definition of an autobiography, however limiting, still encompasses slave narratives in the general sense of their literary tradition. For example, *The Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass* details significant events in Douglass's life: witnessing his aunt being beaten, moving to Baltimore, and teaching himself how to read and write are just a sampling of events in the narrative that bring it to life. These "seemingly fragmented and unrelated" events and the "enormous diversity of experience" that Douglass details in his *Narrative* eventually are realized into the image of the man we find in Frederick Douglass. This "coherent and comprehensive whole" points toward a very specific purpose: to detail the effects that slavery has on a person, and to serve as a resource to stand behind the movement for abolition (Sekora 509).

Each of these characteristics is also fulfilled by Harriet E. Wilson's *Our Nig; or, Sketches from the Life of a Free Black*. Although this book takes the form of a fictional novel, it is an

autobiographical account of Wilson's life working in the Belmont's house. Although this account takes the form of a novel, we still see anecdotes from the life of Wilson portrayed. She is essentially dropped off at the Belmont house and left by her mother to live with this family, Mrs. Belmont beats her and expects her to do house work, and she eventually ends up a poor, lonely woman struggling to succeed. The novel ultimately sends that message that abuse and neglect cause irreparable damage to a person, and it shows the experiences that African Americans faced in the time of slavery—regardless of if they were free or a slave.

This narrative has a coherent meaning derived from a series of anecdotes spanning over a period of time, outlining how these events led Wilson's journey to selfhood; the characteristics that Sekora points out that all autobiographies should have are present. This book also takes on the formal components of a slave narrative that Levine points out in his essay, including the "lack of a clear sense of parentage, the accounts of separations from family members, the portrayals of brutal masters and overseers" (Levine 1). The novel even boasts a preface and appendix written to soften the opinions of her white audience, which is also characteristic of slave narratives. These works by Douglass and Wilson lie within both realms of slave narrative and autobiography.

These characteristics are important in the world of slave narratives, though. Many of the slave narratives that have been published contain a preface or an appendix, if not both. Unfortunately, as history goes, the vast majority of the literate at this time were white. Many African Americans were still enslaved, and as Douglass points out in his Narrative, the general mindset among slave owners was that "Learning would spoil the best n_____ in the world" (Douglass 40). With the major audience being white, these prefaces and appendices act as a sort of "buffer," offering credibility to the author of the narrative.

Sekora's argument continues to say that slave narratives aren't examples of an autobiography because "the stated purpose of the slave narrative is far different from the creation of a self, and the overarching shape of that story is mandated by persons other than the subject," (Sekora 509). His argument is that these prefaces and appendices are evidence of the voice of African American authors being taken over and imposed upon by their white publishers and sponsors. He isn't entirely wrong in this assertion, either. The narratives take their form in the prose and voice of traditional white authors, which is attributed to white publishers. Sekora argues "the introductory letters can be seen as causal to the narratives they precede. The slave is the primitive other whose silence allows white sponsors to describe the grace, the beauty of their own civilized voices" (Sekora 510).

On the other hand, though, we might argue that these are just some of the earliest examples of the African American voice. In Douglass's Narrative, the struggle to attain literacy is an issue represented that is unique to African Americans. His desire to learn is matched by his master, Master Hugh's refusal to let him learn. Douglass eventually learns how to write through Hugh's son's old copybooks and through the poor white children that lived in the same neighborhood—essentially appropriating the white voice and language, making it his own. These types of stories regarding the attainment of literacy show up in multiple other narratives, with over thirty listed on the website published by Documenting the American South ("Guide").

Also in Douglass's narrative are concepts of African American spirituality. There is a part of the story when Douglass goes to Thomas Auld's home to complain about his treatment by Covey, and the threat of Covey whipping him when he returns is very apparent. Sandy, a slave from a

neighboring farm gives Douglass a root that will protect him from being whipped by a white man—and surprisingly we never see him whipped again. The root is a reference to rootwork, or conjure, which is another uniquely African American concept. Mentions of conjure in slave narratives are common, and these mentions that may seem foreign to today's reader serve as another reminder of the African American voice in slave narratives. These uniquely African American themes permeate through this literature—starting a conversation among these works that a white voice cannot pale.

Both Douglass and Wilson call upon their black “brethren,” naming them as an audience that they intend to reach. Wilson says in her preface to *Our Nig*, “I sincerely appeal to my colored brethren universally for patronage, hoping that they will not condemn this attempt of their sister to be erudite, but rally around me a faithful band of supporters and defenders” (Wilson 3-4). These calls directly to African American readers speak most evidently to the idea of an African American voice that won't be silenced or shut down by white editors or sponsors. These works are uniquely African American, and have the ability to speak to both audiences.

Levine asks the question: “Can it really be said that white autobiographers, as opposed to the black narrators of the slave narrative, are able to stand apart from the mediating forces of their culture?” What he means is that African American authors who wrote these narratives were obviously appropriated by the dominant culture of literature in a way that a white author would have never had to even realize (Levine 2). In essence, claiming that slave narratives don't have a place in the canon of American autobiographies just because they were written in the language of their editors wouldn't be fair.

Slave narratives definitely belong in the category of autobiographies for multiple reasons. Their events have been authenticated. Narratives, like in the examples of Douglass's *Narrative of the Life of Fredrick Douglass* and Harriet E. Wilson's *Our Nig: Or, Sketches from the Life of a Free Black*, have the same qualities as autobiographies. Finally, and most importantly, slave narratives are some of the first accounts of the African American voice in our culture, and I agree with Robert Levine's implications that they should be regarded as a unique addition to the genre of autobiography.

Works Cited

Douglass, Fredrick. *Narrative of the Life of Fredrick Douglass*. Amazon Digital Services, Inc. 2012. Kindle AZW file.

"Guide to Religious Content in Slave Narratives." *North American Slave Narratives*. Ed. Grendler Marcella, Leiter Andrew, and Sexton Jill. Documenting the American South, 2004. Web. 10 Feb. 2014.

Levine, Robert S. "The Slave Narrative and the Revolutionary Tradition of American Autobiography." (n.d.): n. pag. Web. 23 Jan. 2014. PDF.

Sekora, John. "Black Message/White Envelope: Genre, Authenticity, and Authority in the Antebellum Slave Narrative." *Callaloo* 32 (1987): 482-515. JSTOR. Web. 23 Jan. 2014.

Wilson, Harriet E. *Our Nig, Or; Sketches from the Life of a Free Black, in a Two-Story White House, North Showing that slavery's shadows fall even there.* Amazon Digital Services, Inc. 2011. Kindle AZW file.

gradesfixer.com