

Solomon Northup: Twelve Years a Slave, Forever a Witness

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Harriet Beecher Stowe wrote in her 1853 book, *The Key to Uncle Tom's Cabin*, that “[i]t is a singular coincidence that Solomon Northup was carried to a plantation in the Red [R]iver country—the same region where the scene of Uncle Tom’s captivity was laid—and [where Northup’s] accounts . . . form a striking parallel” (174) to events in her best-selling novel, *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*. Stowe’s *Key*, a response to critics who claimed she exaggerated the inhumanity of slavery in her bestseller, was for sale months before Northup’s book was published, but after an account of his ordeal had been printed in the January 20, 1853 edition of the *New York Times*. In response to Mrs. Stowe’s mention of his experience, Northup dedicated his book, *Twelve Years a Slave*, to her. When Ohio’s *Anti-Slavery Bugle* advertised their fourteen thousand copies of the book for sale on September 3, 1853, they quoted Stowe’s mention of the “striking parallel” under the headline “Truth is Stranger than Fiction” in their advertisement.

The word “fiction” not only referred to Stowe’s novel, but also to the veracity of the portrayal of Southern slavery. Abolitionists edited the narratives of former slaves to use as propaganda for the abolition of slavery; as a result, readers and politicians alike debated the “truth” of the treatment of slaves, especially after the success of Stowe’s best-selling novel. But in the case of Northup, how could anyone refute an eyewitness? The history of the critical reception of Northup’s narrative, how readers and scholars understood it and responded to it, shows a steadily developing recognition that Northup’s account was different from traditional slave narratives, not only because Northup was kidnapped into slavery rather than born into it, but chiefly because Northup’s account is a memoir, a work that transforms memory into a universal experience instead of simply reciting the facts about a particular time and place.

Before he was abducted and sold into slavery, Solomon Northup had been born a free man in 1808 in eastern New York State to the freed slave Mintus Northup and his wife, a biracial woman whose name is not recorded. After he was kidnapped, Northup lost his name. Literate, Northup had to hide his ability to read and write after he was enslaved. But as soon as he regained his freedom, he narrated a book about living as a slave for twelve years in the central Louisiana cotton and sugar cane fields.

According to author and critic James Olney's seminal essay, "Master Plan for Slave Narratives," Northup's is no different from other slave narratives written during the nineteenth century in that the narrative carefully establishes the fact that the author actually existed, a fact no white writer would have to prove (51). Olney's list of slave narrative conventions also includes a portrait of the narrator, the name of the white transcriber (if applicable), a "poetic epigraph," statements from at least one white person as to the truthfulness of the narrative, and a recounting of the former slave's birth (50). Northup's book has an engraved portrait of the author in his "plantation suit," under which he has signed his name, a proof of his literacy. The book's white transcriber, in this case David Wilson, a lawyer about ten years younger than Northup, testified that the narrator "adhered strictly to the truth" (Northup xv); the epigraph is from the eighteenth-century poet William Cowper (taken from his masterwork *The Task: A Poem in Six Books*). Northup begins his narrative not with the words "I was born . . .," but with the words "[h]aving been born a free man . . ." (Northup 17), which alerts readers to a unique perspective. Even so, the slave narrative conventions Olney catalogues begin to waver, slipping from the formula for slave narrative into the genre of memoir.

Northup's transcriber, Wilson, may have been familiar with the devices often used by abolitionist editors to authenticate a former slave's story. Henry Northup, Solomon's rescuer and an active abolitionist, had very likely read accounts of slavery written by former slaves, which, with few exceptions, would have been edited by white men, and Henry Northup, according to a *New York Times* column, asked Wilson to write Solomon Northup's account

(Herschthal). Abolitionists knew that because of the status of slaves as not quite human beings, black authors had to first assert a slave's humanity. As far back as the mid-1700s, black writers, such as Briton Hammon, wrote first to establish themselves as truthful and reasonable, as evidenced by Hammon's long title, in which he describes his "sufferings" and his return to his master. That a slave was born as any human being was born should guide readers to an understanding of the humanity of slaves, which could lead to their support for the abolishment of slavery.

By 1837, white abolitionists were using a set of questions to select former slaves for speaking engagements (Neary 13), a practice that supports the formulaic idea of slave-narrative conventions, which would also appeal to white audiences. Olney writes that "the absence of any reference to memory" except to "make the past facts and events of slavery immediately present to the writer" and the reader characterizes the former-slave autobiography (48). However, Northup not only refers to his memory, he offers details of slave work and Southern social habits, something other narratives do not. Northup's narrative reads more like a literary memoir than an autobiography designed to discredit slavery. In fact, Northup ends his book by stating he has "no comments to make upon the subject of Slavery" (321). Earlier in the narrative, he writes he was driven to survive because he had no wish to die "among strangers," but only "in the bosom of" his "family" (83); in other words, Solomon Northup wants to survive his *kidnapping* long enough to get back to his home. He writes that he plans to trust "Providence and [his] own shrewdness for deliverance" (92). Northup feels "the weight of slavery" because he is a hostage; he does not claim to write in order to abolish slavery, but to interpret the events of his life and to itemize the dehumanization that stripped him of his identity and required him to speak to white men "in the attitude and language of a slave" (183). His perspective is similar to that of those who authored American captivity narratives, which were written in part to show the power of the Christian God, who would facilitate a rescue, over the power of heathen kidnappers (Slotkin 94). Northup's book further departs from the slave narrative conventions to show readers that

he has an interior life, one of the requirements writer Toni Morrison believes is necessary to writing memoir (91).

Recalling the success of *Uncle Tom's Cabin* a year earlier, reviews of Northup's memoir were published in abolitionist newspapers, including the September 3, 1853 *Anti-Slavery Bugle*, which offered quotes from other liberal-thinking newspapers, like the *New-York Evangelist* ("We think the story affecting as any tale of sorrow could be"), the *Pittsburg Dispatch* ("The book is one of most absorbing interest") and the *Syracuse Journal* ("It is one of the most effective books against slavery that was ever written"). The abolitionist newspapers that published these reviews were not only established to abolish Southern slavery, but also to present Free states as refuges of "liberty and equality" (*Encyclopedia of American Journalism* 4). The North was imagined as "an enchanted region, the Paradise of the earth" (Northup 260), in contrast to the paranoid and racist hell of the South, as the *Anti-Slavery Bugle's* review of *Uncle Tom's Cabin* reminds readers in identifying that novel as one that will "fan into fresh fury the . . . fears and prejudices of our Southern brothers" (May 8, 1852). Mainstream newspapers, however, also reviewed Northup's book, giving it a similar reception.

The *New York Daily Tribune* published in a review on July 21, 1853, the month the book was released and six months after Northup's interview with the *New York Times*, an excerpt of Northup's book. The review ended by saying, "No one can contemplate the scenes [described in the excerpt] without a new conviction of the hideousness of the institution from which the subject of the narrative has happily escaped" (7). The August 26, 1853 advertisement in the abolitionist newspaper *The Liberator*, by Derby and Miller in Auburn, New York, and Derby, Orton & Mulligan in Buffalo, quotes a series of reviews, including one by the famed Frederick Douglass.¹ The *Liberator* would quote Douglass' commentary about Northup's book, reminding readers the book was "a strange history" in that the narrator was "for thirty years a *man*, with all a man's hopes and fears and aspirations . . . then for twelve years a *thing*, a chattel, personal, classed with mules and horses (Eakin and Logsdon ix).

But the next month, in September 1853, the *Daily Evening Star* presented a front page ad by Gray and Ballantyne Bookstore housed on Seventh Street in Washington D.C., that announced the availability of *Twelve Years a Slave* for one dollar, with no mention of the author's race or name, as though the story, not the political perspective, was most important. And the story is perhaps what keeps the book in print. The original title of the book, *Twelve Years a Slave: Narrative of Solomon Northup, a Citizen of New-York, Kidnapped in Washington City in 1841 and Rescued in 1853*, which offers almost a summary of the plot, would be advertised as *Twelve Years a Slave or the Life of Solomon Northup* in the July 20, 1854 *New York Tribune*, showing also that the book was still popular a year after its release under the publishers Derby and Miller.

Derby and N. C. Miller expanded to include Orton and Mulligan, who published the book as late as 1856. By 1858, N. C. Miller joined the C. M. Saxton Publishing Company, apparently taking the title with him because Saxton published the book, which had, by 1855, sold twenty-seven thousand copies (Brown, Davis, Lee 696). Yet another publisher was in possession of the manuscript sixteen years after the Civil War. Philadelphia publisher John E. Potter & Company's list of available books in 1881 included *Twelve Years a Slave* by S. Northup; Derby and Miller's copyright would have expired in that year (Fiske, Brown, Seligman 169). Talty and Wiley of Dallas, Texas, published the book in 1890, even printing the same preface from Potter Publishers that stated, "the questions of race, color and social standing are forever settled on American soil" (xv).

The International Book Company, in business from 1890–92, reissued the book with a variation of the Talty and Wiley and Potter preface that states:

To experience all this was the misfortune of Mr. Northup; and his story, simple and artless affords an insight and enlists a sympathy far deeper than any work of fiction which genius can produce. It is on this account that the publishers have undertaken to issue a new edition of this work. And surely, at this time when the exciting questions of color, of race, and of social standing are forever settled on American soil by the Magna Charta of our common rights, the Constitution,

surely, now, a reprint of the story of a slave, thrilling in its details, calls for no apology.

While this edition may be echoing much of the prefaces to earlier editions, it also mentions Northup's "insight," a quality essential to written memoir.

Northup's book remains out of print after this issue until it is reprinted in 1968, edited by historians Sue Eakin and Joseph Logsdon. But while it was out of print, it was not out of mind. The *Goodland [Kansas] Republic* in "Truthful Tales told by Veterans" March 1, 1895, quotes one vet as traveling with "soldiers" from the Red River Expedition who had served under "Bangs" [Banks] when they met the former slaves mentioned by Northup as having lived with him on the Epps plantation: Uncle Abram, Wiley, Aunt Phoebe, Patsy, Bob, Henry, and Edward. The unnamed vet even quotes Sam Bass' sentiments about slavery from Northup's "old book": "There will be a reckoning [for slavery] . . . a day that will burn as in an oven" (6). As if to show that the book had not left the American consciousness, the "Letters to the Editor" column of the January 17, 1912 *Washington Times*, quotes from the book to argue how employers might learn how to "increase efficiency in labor" (8). The writer, signed with the initials, A. W. B., notes that slave owner Epps was able to increase his harvest productivity by whipping his slaves, quoting Northup's book as saying that if a "hand falls short" of bringing in 200 pounds of cotton a day "a greater or lesser number of lashes is the penalty" (8).

Before Sue Eakin's and Joseph Logsdon's September 1968 edition from LSU Press, there is no evidence of the book having been published in the twentieth century, but the book was certainly in personal libraries, and that was where Eakin first discovered it. In her private papers, Eakin explains that she was introduced to the out-of-print book in 1930, when she was twelve years old and recognized the names and places Northup mentioned. Eakin writes, "Never before had I read a book with the names and places of people I knew, places that were a part of our everyday life" (Eakin "Documenting" 1). Eakin would later verify the account of Northup's life as a slave

by verifying the existence of the places and people he named in his narrative, including the original Epps house that Northup and Samuel Bass built just before Northup was freed from captivity (Eakin “Long, Long Trail” 6). Eakin’s co-editor, Joseph Logsdon, found verification of Northup’s story by uncovering legal papers that confirmed Northup’s failed lawsuit against his kidnappers and the bill-of-sale for Northup from an Orleans Parish auction barn (Eakin “Long, Long Trail” 10–11). Eakin, in particular, seems to have read the book as a memoir and less as a political tract that could be easily dismissed by the descendants of those named in it. Her conversational footnotes mention details that sometimes provide little explanation of Northup’s text, but much about the land and people of Central Louisiana. That the book was used as abolitionist propaganda doesn’t make it mere propaganda, however, and this is what motivated Eakin to explore the authenticity of the events Northup describes.

Events are not all that Northup mentions. He is self-reflective and, because of his observations and experiences, comes to a certain conclusion about the society in which he finds himself. Northup writes that he had been “too ignorant, too independent, to conceive how anyone could be content to live in the abject condition of the slave” (26). But, as he lives the life of a slave, he learns well how that life is better than an anonymous, perhaps torturous, death away from family and friends. Northup, not the abolition of slavery, becomes the hero of his story; he is transformed from free man to slave and back to free man, from independent businessman to dependent laborer and back to businessman.

The study of slavery and of the narratives that told about it began in earnest in the 1950s, after World War II and the integration of soldiers who fought “Nazi racism” (Davis 1). The Work Progress Administration (WPA) had employed writers to record the experiences of ex-slaves. Over two thousand interviews revealed an enormous amount of material for historians (Davis 7), and when the Black studies curricula was advanced at colleges and universities across the country in the early 1960s, interest in the narratives of slaves and former slaves skyrocketed (Davis 9). Among the many

narratives from the nineteenth century that were reprinted in the twentieth was Solomon Northup's, with the shortened title *Twelve Years a Slave*, and a seven hundred-fifty percent increase in price.

Walter Lowrey, in the Spring 1969 issue of *Louisiana History*, was among the first to review Eakin's and Logsdon's edition of *Twelve Years a Slave*. Lowrey writes that Northup's book is not one of the "products of white minds and abolitionist pleading," but is an account "enhanced by the [editors'] careful verification of names, places, and dates, as well as by the inclusion of pertinent legal documents" (174). Another reviewer in the *Florida Historical Quarterly* writes in January 1969 that "Solomon Northup's story is a shaft of ruthless white light, illuminating one of the darkest pages in American history" (Slaughter 322). The reviewer encourages Southerners in particular to read the book, so that "they can understand the true nature of the curse which, more than one hundred years later, still hangs like a millstone around the neck of the South" (Slaughter 322). The memories of Solomon Northup rise from obscurity to become the foundation for scholarly arguments about slavery. Eakin's and Logsdon's edition inspired decades of landmark research and commentary.

The time was certainly right for a reprinting of Northup's work. Within a year of Eakin's and Logsdon's edition, Gilbert Osofsky, a leading historian from the University of Illinois at Chicago, published Northup's narrative in 1969 in the book: *Puttin' On Ole Massa: The Slave Narratives of Henry Bibb, William Wells Brown, and Solomon Northup*. He fails to include the illustrations from the original works, however, a failure, as James Olney notes, that doesn't allow modern readers to gain a sense of "the flavor" of the narratives (72). Olney further criticizes Osofsky's edition because Wilson's preface has been deleted, which implies that Northup wrote the narrative himself (71). While Olney does not mention Eakin's and Logsdon's edition, he writes that Northup's memoir and certain other narratives "deserve to be considered for a place in American literature, a place beyond the merely historical" (70). Young adults were not to be excluded from knowing about Northup and his experiences. Northup's story was adapted and retitled *In*

Chains to Louisiana by Michael Knight in 1971, and years later, in 1998, Sue Eakin follows with Solomon Northup's *Twelve Years a Slave: 1841–1853 Rewritten for Younger Readers*.

John Blassingame, a former Yale professor and editor of Frederick Douglass' papers, relied on the Eakin-Logsdon edition to write his popular 1975 essay about the use of ex-slave accounts of slavery. He reminds us that scholars who have "investigated judicial proceedings . . . local records, newspapers and city directories have proven" the truth of ex-slave narratives (479). Still others, such as Milton Polsky of Hunter College, relied on Osofsky and archived library copies of Northup's book. Through the 1970s, scholars rely on Northup's book to help examine nineteenth-century Southern social and economic systems. One expert on elementary and secondary education from Hunter College writes that the narrative is excellent for "young people" because it shows the "imagination and daring" of slaves (Polsky 173).

Northup's commentary was used to help comprehend the morality of slave owners. Indiana University professor Raymond Hedin explains that Northup, because of his emotional distance from the lives of slaves, does not "see evil everywhere" in the South, but understands that "the system produces evil everywhere" (635). Northup's memoir helped historians understand the essence of what maintained Southern slavery, including the idea of altering a human being's sense of self. Writing for the *American Quarterly*, Kristin Hoganson believes the pen and ink drawings in Northup's book show how slavery "altered [Northup's] stature as a man" (576). She presents the first image readers have of Northup, one that shows him sitting on a small table in his "plantation suit," against the last image that shows an upright man embracing his wife (577–78). Other scholars note Northup's mention of insurrection, of the details of his attack on his master, of his attempts to escape, and of the "preoccupation enslaved Africans had" with rebellion (Forbes 41). Northup's book is invaluable in learning more about the techniques of slave kidnappers and of slave pens, or blocks of small, filthy rooms similar to modern prison cells arranged around a larger room, where slaves could be sold at auction. In a lengthy article about slavery

in Washington, D.C., historian and archivist Mary Beth Corrigan draws extensively on Northup's description of William's slave pen on C Street near the Capitol (11–12).

Northup's narrative was studied not only by historians and literary critics, but also by law professors, who reviewed landmark cases that showed how slaves were mortgaged or how they were used in litigation. Areila Gross, a professor of law and history at University of Southern California, recalls how Northup was not hanged because an overseer claimed Northup was the property of his employer (William Ford), who had a mortgage on "Platt" (660). In a discussion of St. Landry Parish, Louisiana "Freedom Cases" or situations where a slave could "initiate a *liber vel non* [free or not] action," Northup is noted as "the most famous case of a person illegally held in bondage" in Louisiana (Oubre and Fontenot 319). Reviews of books about American slave markets mention Northup's book, as do reviews of books about the American Southern identity. Within fifteen years of the republication of *Twelve Years a Slave*, work was underway on a Public Broadcasting Service (PBS) film about Solomon Northup entitled *Solomon Northup's Odyssey*. Aired in 1984, the film was generally praised as excellent, and it generated scholarly research on the process of accurately rendering the brutality of slave life in an audio-visual medium.

Over the following two decades, no scholarly discussion of the late antebellum South or of eyewitness accounts of the institution of slavery failed to make note of Northup's narrative, but it was in 2013 that Northup's story reached its largest audience ever. A new biography of Solomon Northup was published by David Fiske, Clifford W. Brown, and Rachel Seligman shortly after the theatrical release of Steven McQueen's film adaptation of *12 Years a Slave*, which received near-universal critical acclaim, multiple film awards and many more nominations, and brought Northup's story to a large international audience. One of the most significant memoirs of the nineteenth century and a forgotten story in the twentieth century, it has become one of the most compelling memoirs of the twenty-first.

Note

1. Coincidentally, Douglass wrote on the same date (August 26, 1853) in his own newspaper about “a Legree” from Louisiana who had “killed a slave of ninety years” because of the slave’s “revolutionary reminiscences” (Schantz 140). The owner “whipped, stamped, and kicked” (140) the slave to death. Douglass’ description supports not only Northup’s account of the horror of slavery, but also the idea that dying free was better than dying as a slave, an idea that Northup already understood.

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