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## The Inner Workings of Slavery

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I suffered much more during the second winter than I did during the first. My limbs were benumbed by inactions, and the cold filled them with cramp. I had a very painful sensation of coldness in my head; even my face and tongue stiffened, and I lost the power of speech. Of course it was impossible, under the circumstances, to summon any physician. My brother William came and did all he could for me. Uncle Phillip also watched tenderly over me; and poor grandmother crept up and down to inquire whether there was any signs of returning life. I was restored to consciousness by the dashing of cold water in my face, and found myself leaning against my brother's arm, while he bent over me with streaming eyes. He afterwards told me he thought I was dying, for I had been in an unconscious state sixteen hours. I next became delirious, and was in great danger of betraying myself and my friends. To prevent this, they stupefied me with drugs. I remained in bed six weeks, weary in body and sick at heart...I asked why the curse of slavery was permitted to exist, and why I had been so persecuted and wronged from youth upward. These things took the shape of mystery, which is to this day not so clear to my soul as I trust it will be hereafter.

-Harriet Jacobs, 1861.<sup>1</sup>

The inner workings and functioning of slavery, how a slave lived, were a mystery to those who did not experience it firsthand. In some parts of the country, most commonly in the North, slavery was the “peculiar institution” that belonged to the South. Some northerners opposed slavery, some may not have seen it as a problem, and to others, it was a necessary institution. Slavery's supporters often painted it as positive and productive. For some, their first exposure to slavery, and the life of a slave, was through slave narratives that emerged in the antebellum North. These stories were written and shared by former slaves. The authors of these tales ranged from those who were born into slavery, to those who were stolen and forced into captivity. Slave narratives tell the story of a life of bondage—the struggles, the pains, and the horrors that accompanied a life of slavery—and they often carried common themes in regards to occurrences in the daily lives of slaves.

During the antebellum period leading up to the American Civil War, all types of propaganda concerning slavery circulated throughout the country. Southerners tried to convince the country that slavery was a “positive good,” while abolitionists argued it was a crime against humanity. The most powerful type of propaganda or persuasive literature that emerged in this time was the slave narrative. There were quite a few slave narratives published in the antebellum period, but three that seem to have had strong influences on northern opinion were *Twelve Years a Slave*, by Solomon

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<sup>1</sup> Harriet Jacobs, *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* (1861 repr., New York: Oxford University Press, 1988), 185-186.

Northrup, *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*, by Harriet Jacobs, and *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, an American Slave*, by Frederick Douglass. Each one of these narratives was written under different circumstances—Douglass and Jacobs were both born into slavery and Northrup was stolen into captivity—but they all worked to show northerners the evils of slavery. Jacobs’ narrative offers an in-depth view as to what life was like as a female slave, and the extremes that a mother would go to secure freedom for herself and her children. The narrative written by Frederick Douglass showed a man who was willing to risk his life for freedom and how the road out of slavery was by no means easy. Possibly the most concerning narrative to northerners would be that written by Solomon Northrup, a free man, stolen and sold into slavery. For many northerners, slavery was a distant problem that had no direct effect on them, but when introduced to Northrup’s story, they may have been shocked to find that their own neighbors could be stolen into slavery if they were black. These three narratives tell very different stories, but together they provide a well-rounded picture of slavery, focusing on essential problems and events, that many northerners were not prepared to see.

The experience of slaves varied over time and place, but as seen in these narratives, slaves often seemed to share experiences binding them together into one community, which astounded northerners.<sup>2</sup> Some slaves, such as Harriet Jacobs, did not know they were slaves for the first few years of their lives. Jacobs was left to be raised by her parents, and did not realize that she could, at any moment, be taken away to be sold.<sup>3</sup> Young children were unaware of the fact that they were someone else’s property, but the issue of their ownership was often used to keep their families in line. The threat of selling slaves to separate them from their families was often used to discipline slaves and encourage them to follow orders.<sup>4</sup> Although slaves came from all different backgrounds, they were often able to define a communal identity because of the common life they shared through the slave trade.<sup>5</sup> Solomon Northrup had not been born into a life of slavery. He had been kidnapped and robbed of his liberty when he found his free papers to be missing, yet he still found similarities with those with whom he was imprisoned.<sup>6</sup> Diverse experiences in their youth and the progression of their lives gave each slave a unique story to tell, but their differences did not stop them from bonding together to survive the hardships they endured.

Slave narratives offer insight into the slave market which was unimaginable to those who did not experience it firsthand. The stories describe the logistics of buying and selling slaves. The process in which people were bought and sold, as if they were simple livestock, was surprising to northerners who were aware of the existence of the slave trade, but not the technicalities that were associated with it. Advertisements for slaves consisted of their, “sex, racial designation, age, and skill” when they were put on the market and bargaining over slaves could take days.<sup>7</sup> Northrup bluntly notes how slaveholders examined slaves for perspective purchase, “precisely as a jockey examines a horse which he is about to barter for or purchase.”<sup>8</sup> Slaveholders, it seemed, only saw the likes of Northrup and his fellow captives as animals. The slave market and its intricacies were only the beginning of life as a slave in the Antebellum South.

The daily lives of slaves were complex, and slave narratives showed northerners the extremes such as the everyday violence experienced by some. Children saw violence so early and often in their

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<sup>2</sup> On the diversity of slave experiences see Ira Berlin, “Time, Space, and the Evolution of Afro-American Society on British Mainland North America,” *The American Historical Review*, 85, no. 1 (February, 1980): 44-78. For a short, concise review of the historiography on slavery, see “Historiography,” in *Slavery in the United States: A Social, Political, and Historical Encyclopedia*, Vol. 1, ed. Junius P. Rodriguez (Santa Barbara, CA: ABC-CIO, 2007), 340-347.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, 12.

<sup>4</sup> David Davis, *Inhuman Bondage: The Rise and Fall of Slavery in the New World* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2006), 183.

<sup>5</sup> Walter Johnson, *Soul by Soul: Life inside the Antebellum Slave Market* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1999), 71.

<sup>6</sup> Solomon Northrup, *Twelve Years a Slave* (1853, repr., Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1968), 20.

<sup>7</sup> Johnson, 138-139.

<sup>8</sup> Northrup, 52.

lives that there are some stories that have circulated about children pretending to be overseers and whipping each other.<sup>9</sup> Frederick Douglass remarks that when he was a child, he would often see young children whip their half siblings, related to them through their father—who, as the master of the plantation, could not or would not show paternal partiality to his slave children.<sup>10</sup> As an adult, Solomon Northup was flogged for simply stating he was a free man; he learned quickly that many overseers and slaveholders were quick with the whip.<sup>11</sup> It was not uncommon for slaveholders to give their slaves mixed messages, being very liberal with the whip one moment and then giving gifts and time off in another.<sup>12</sup> A version of time off could be given to slaves if their master gave them a pass to visit other plantations nearby. A slave caught without a pass from his or her master, however, could be whipped by any white man.<sup>13</sup>

Holidays for slaves, as depicted in slave narratives, were very different than what most people would think of when they thought of the happy times and joyous celebration that surrounded the holiday season. The cotton-picking season required intense work, so when the harvest season was finished, it was usually followed by another type of time off in the form of holidays and periods of celebration and festivity.<sup>14</sup> Harriet Jacobs remembered the slaves usually getting four or five holidays around Christmas time, depending on what the master thought was proper in respect to the work they had done.<sup>15</sup> Frederick Douglass remembered the holiday times in bleak terms. He saw that the masters attempted to use this time to show their slaves the evils of freedom and confuse them into believing that slavery was best for them.<sup>16</sup> Daily lives of slaves were nothing less than confusing and conflicting, often differing from plantation-to-plantation and sometimes even slave-to-slave.

The reality of slavery, as shown in slave narratives, was that there was a prominent inequality between how women and men were treated. Female slaves, like the men, were property and therefore lived at the pleasure and will of their master. Harriet Jacobs wrote, “Slavery is terrible for men; but it is far more terrible for women...added to the burden common to all, *they* have wrongs, and sufferings, and mortifications peculiarly their own,” very clearly reflecting on her own experiences of sexual exploitation and those she had witnessed.<sup>17</sup> Having complete control and ownership over the women they bought gave slaveholders the authority to do whatever they wished. Frederick Douglass remembered a woman who was bought specifically for the purpose of breeding and was forced by her master to produce children who would then become his slaves.<sup>18</sup> Slave masters had a calculated regard for the economic prosperity that women under their ownership could bring them by having children.<sup>19</sup> However, slaveholders did not always think purely in economic terms. They sometimes made decisions that would cost them a slave. Harriet Jacobs was witness to a woman being sold because she argued with her husband over the fatherhood of her newborn, and she came too close to saying that it was her master’s child.<sup>20</sup> Women could often be punished for actions that they had no control over and were victims of sexual exploitation themselves.

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<sup>9</sup> Davis, 199.

<sup>10</sup> Frederick Douglass, *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, an American Slave* (1845, repr., New Haven: Yale University Press, 2001), 15.

<sup>11</sup> Northup, 24-25.

<sup>12</sup> Davis, 196.

<sup>13</sup> Northup, 118.

<sup>14</sup> Davis, 199.

<sup>15</sup> Jacobs, 25.

<sup>16</sup> Douglass, 56.

<sup>17</sup> Jacobs, 119.

<sup>18</sup> Douglass, 48.

<sup>19</sup> Peter Kolchin, *American Slavery: 1619-1877* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1993), 139.

<sup>20</sup> Jacobs, 24.

As can be seen in slave narratives, women who were taken advantage of, or became mothers of their own account, were not treated as equals to free women. Many slaveholders attempted to paint slave mothers as lazy and uninterested in their children or their responsibilities as mothers.<sup>21</sup> In *Twelve Years a Slave*, Solomon Northup indirectly disputes the claim when he speaks of Eliza and her spirit dying when she is separated from the children she loves.<sup>22</sup> Frederick Douglass was separated from his mother when he was young, but he remembered spending time with her at night when she would sneak over to sleep with him.<sup>23</sup> Women who lived in the ownership of another did not have any rights to their children or even their own bodies. Since every part of the female slave was the property of the slaveholder, including the womb, the child of a slave mother was thus also the property of the female slave's master.<sup>24</sup> Mothers gave birth knowing that their children would be slaves and that there was very little, most often nothing, they could do to change it. Problems often arose for female slaves with their masters that most male slaves never had to consider.

It is commonly brought to light in slave narratives that for some female slaves being the favorite of their master could arouse the fury of their mistresses and make their lives much worse. When Epps started to show a favoritism to a slave woman named Patsey, his wife became enraged and would often threaten Patsey's life because of the affection bestowed upon her.<sup>25</sup> Some slaves were subject to their master's sexual whim because the mistress of the house was not there to satisfy him and the girl was his property.<sup>26</sup> Harriet Jacobs, on reaching the age of fifteen, started receiving advances from her master who claimed that she was his property to do with what he wished.<sup>27</sup> Abolitionists argued that slavery deprived women of their self-respect when they were sexually exploited and degraded by their masters.<sup>28</sup> Despite the objection of their wives and some in society, male slave owners frequently took advantage of their female slaves and took a part of their humanity every time they did.

Many people knew of the few successful slave revolts that took place in the antebellum South, but slave narratives shed light on how the slaves themselves were affected by these revolts. There were a handful of insurrections that were quickly crushed by minimal armed force, but these still put the thoughts of revolt into the minds of panicked whites.<sup>29</sup> Nat Turner led one of the most famous successful slave revolts in which he and his followers murdered around sixty whites, most of whom were women and children.<sup>30</sup> Living nearby to where Turner's rebellion took place, Harriet Jacobs remembered the ramifications of the murders at the hands of other slaves. Jacobs, safe in her grandmother's house, watched white men search through houses, beat innocent black people, and look for any reason to punish any colored person or slave.<sup>31</sup> There were few cases when slaves fought back against their masters, or caused any genuine problems that would spark such a widespread manhunt. In one case, a female slave named Celia who had become a favorite of her master ended up killing him and burying his remains. In the end, however, she was betrayed by another slave and caught.<sup>32</sup> In Solomon Northup's time in bondage, he was strung up and almost

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<sup>21</sup> Thavolia Glymph, *Out of the House of Bondage: The Transformation of the Plantation Household* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008), 66.

<sup>22</sup> Northup, 57.

<sup>23</sup> Douglass, 14.

<sup>24</sup> Edward Baptist, *The Half Has Never Been Told: Slavery and the Making of American Capitalism* (New York: Basic Books, 2014), 106.

<sup>25</sup> Northup, 143.

<sup>26</sup> Baptist, 215.

<sup>27</sup> Jacobs, 44-45.

<sup>28</sup> Davis, 255.

<sup>29</sup> Kolchin, 156.

<sup>30</sup> Davis, 208.

<sup>31</sup> Jacobs, 98.

<sup>32</sup> Davis, 202.

killed because he dared to fight back against a white man who wanted to whip him.<sup>33</sup> Though there were few successful rebellions led by slaves, the fact that there were any caused slaveholders in the South to begin to fear their slaves to some extent.

In the wake of various revolts and rebellions, slave narratives tell the story of how fear caused a transition in the role religion played in the lives of slaves and the important function it took up in the relationship between master and slave. Harriet Jacobs recollects that after Nat Turner's insurrection, many slaveholders decided to provide their slaves with enough religious instruction to keep them from murdering their masters.<sup>34</sup> Southern clergymen and planters alike believed that religious instruction would make slaves more obedient and accept their place in the world.<sup>35</sup> In attempting to bring Christianity into the lives of their slaves, slaveholders strove to find another aspect of their slaves' lives that they could control.<sup>36</sup> Jacobs remembered one clergyman who gave the slaves sermons that they could understand and treated them like they were actual human beings, but the white parishioners quickly complained about the quality of services.<sup>37</sup> Frederick Douglass claimed that slaveholders who were religious were the worst kind of masters as they used religion to justify appalling barbarity, as justification for the "darkest, foulest, grossest, and most infernal deeds" that a slaveholder could commit.<sup>38</sup> Often, slaveholders would try to use the Bible to strike fear into the hearts of their slaves. One mistress would cherry pick sections of the Bible to read to her slaves, emphasizing how the devil would punish slaves that stole or lied.<sup>39</sup> In Solomon Northup's experience, one of his masters used the New Testament to convey to his slaves that it was God's will that slaves obey their master, and that they could not go against God.<sup>40</sup> Many slave masters looked to religion to try to put their fears to rest, but by introducing religion, some slave owners got more than they bargained for.

Usually slave narratives are written by slaves that knew how to read and write which placed them among a minority of literate slaves. Many slaveholders were opposed to some religious practices, such as teaching their slaves how to read the Bible. They feared that once slaves could read, it would give them a sense of independence that would be much too excessive.<sup>41</sup> In the case of Frederick Douglass, when his master found out his wife had been teaching Douglass to read, he demanded that it be stopped, claiming that a slave "should know nothing but to obey his master," and he would not have Douglass becoming rebellious.<sup>42</sup> Harriet Jacobs was also taught to read by her mistress, unaware that it was a rare privilege closed to most slaves.<sup>43</sup> Indeed, southern authorities forbade slaves from learning to read.<sup>44</sup> Jacobs risked her life to teach one slave how to read the Bible.<sup>45</sup> Solomon Northup, who was educated as a free child, was threatened with a hundred lashes by one of his masters when he found out that Northup was literate.<sup>46</sup> Many slave masters felt threatened not only by the idea that a slave had the ability to read and write just as they did, but that it could lead to slaves coming up with ideas and having thoughts of their own.

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<sup>33</sup> Northup, 80, 87.

<sup>34</sup> Jacobs, 105.

<sup>35</sup> Davis, 202.

<sup>36</sup> Kolchin, 116.

<sup>37</sup> Jacobs, 110.

<sup>38</sup> Douglass, 57.

<sup>39</sup> Glymph, 29.

<sup>40</sup> Northup, 94.

<sup>41</sup> Kolchin, 116.

<sup>42</sup> Douglass, 31.

<sup>43</sup> Jacobs, 16.

<sup>44</sup> Davis, 260.

<sup>45</sup> Jacobs, 112.

<sup>46</sup> Northup, 175.

Although no two slaves had the same exact experience, some slave narratives show what it was like for the slave who did make it out of slavery and lived to tell their stories. Most slaves returned to their masters after running away; whether it was because they were caught, other slaves betrayed them, or they got lost. Many quickly lost hope of ever making it to the free states.<sup>47</sup> Harriet Jacobs hid in a small nook in her grandmother's shed for seven years rather than go back to her life of slavery and abuse from her master.<sup>48</sup> Many slaves thought they would be able to find freedom in the northern states, but with the passing of the Compromise of 1850, there was new legislation that could change everything. The Fugitive Slave Act, a part of the Compromise, mandated that people in both slave and free states and the federal government pursue runaways in any part of the country and return them to their owners.<sup>49</sup> With the passing of the Fugitive Slave Act, many slaves contemplating running away developed particular fears of New York, which had a reputation for strong enforcement of the Fugitive Slave Act. Once a refuge, now slaves understood New York might simply return them to the life of slavery they had always known.<sup>50</sup> The Fugitive Slave Act allowed federal agents who were required to recover fugitive slaves to draft Northern citizens to aid them in seizing blacks suspected of being runaway slaves.<sup>51</sup> Harriet Jacobs was afraid that she might be seized and taken back into slavery, but the woman she worked for was determined never to allow her to be taken back into the South.<sup>52</sup> It was never easy, but there were slaves that made it out of the horrible life of bondage they were either born into, or stolen into, and were left able to tell their tale about life as a slave.

Slavery was a taboo topic in a country that was in part run on the work and power of slaves. It may have been that those in the North did not always have an accurate depiction of slavery and how slaves really lived. Instead, they saw the propaganda and heard what slaveholders wanted them to hear. That all changed, however, with the publishing and circulation of slave narratives. Narratives like *Twelve Years a Slave*, *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*, and *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass* all gave insight and told the true tale of slavery and all it encompassed. It is impossible to say that the authors of slave narratives are unbiased: expecting someone who lived through a life of bondage to not have a position to take on its effect would be ludicrous. However, despite whatever goal they may have had in writing their story, what matters is the truth of what happened. Slave narratives are the stories of slaves, the stories of what millions of people lived through. It is also clear that the memoirs of slaves sought to deliver a powerful, true message to those in the North who did not understand the magnitude of slavery's effect.

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<sup>47</sup> Baptist, 168.

<sup>48</sup> Jacobs, 172, 174.

<sup>49</sup> Baptist, 347.

<sup>50</sup> Douglass, 61.

<sup>51</sup> Davis, 265.

<sup>52</sup> Jacobs, 285.