A REMARKABLE AND enduringly visible legacy of Africans' enslavement in the New World is the slave narrative, the genre of literature created by formerly enslaved black people at once to testify against their captors and to bear witness to the urge of every black slave to be free and literate and accorded all the "rights of man." The slave narrative is a unique creation in the long history of human bondage, designed by a small but exceptionally gifted group of men and women who escaped and who went on to write books about the severe conditions of their bondage within the brutally inhumane social and economic system euphemistically—and inadequately—dubbed "the peculiar institution." These people of African descent *wrote*: once enslaved in the United States or the West Indies, and once secure and free in London or in the North, and with the generous encouragement and assistance of antislavery advocates, they wrote their own stories about life in slavery and about the meaning of freedom.

The Enlightenment discourse on rights and reason gave rise to the slave's discourse on race and reason, and abolitionists in London and in the centers of antislavery sentiment in the United States, such as Boston, Philadelphia, and New York, fueled the development of this genre, in intimate collaboration with these extraordinarily intelligent former slaves, black men and women who were as eager to testify to their intellectual capacities as they were to testify against the evils of slavery to hasten its end. In fact, it is fair to say that the writing and publishing of the slave narratives, especially between 1772 and 1808 (particularly in London), and then again between 1831 and 1865, under the lead initially of William Lloyd Garrison and then of Frederick Douglass, became the basis of the first interracial intellectual move-

ments in the history of England and the United States. As Richard S. Newman observes, "African American writers and readers also forged alliances with white abolitionists. It is no accident, for instance, that much of the extant black protest literature from the eighteenth century flowed from Anglo-American abolitionist capitals: London, New York, and Philadelphia. Wherever African peoples came into contact with abolitionist groups, black-authored antislavery literature appeared."[1] And this was especially the case after William Lloyd Garrison founded the *Liberator* newspaper as America's principal organ of abolitionist advocacy in 1831.

As several scholars have shown, there is an inextricable link in the African American tradition between literacy and freedom. And this linkage composes the structuring principle of the slave narratives. As the novelist Ishmael Reed put the matter in his fictional slave narrative, *Flight to Canada* (1976), the slave who was the first to learn to read and write was the first to run away. While not literally true, the mastery of literacy signified a measure of metaphysical freedom in the realm of the slave, willfully kept illiterate by the masters and their laws, laws that were enacted to perpetuate the myth that persons of African descent were either not actually human beings or were human beings fundamentally different or inferior to other kinds of human beings, destined by nature to be enslaved, in perpetuity.

In literacy lay a peculiar kind of freedom—or burden—for the black person who was enslaved. We do not know exactly how many slaves escaped to freedom across the Ohio River and the Mason-Dixon Line, but some historians estimate that as many as forty or fifty thousand did. (By 1860, 3.9 million black people were in bondage in the slave states, while another 488,000 were free.) Of that number, William L. Andrews has discovered that 102 wrote book-length slave narratives between 1760 and the end of the Civil War. Following the abolition of slavery in 1865 and well into the twentieth century, Andrews concludes that another 102 former slaves also published books about their enslavement. In a sense, this cadre of former slaves formed the nucleus of the black intellectual tradition, the group that W. E. B. Du Bois would define as "the talented tenth," a

figure that, not by accident, I believe, parallels the percentage of black people who were free and most probably literate in 1860. Statistically, these authors were very special people. Despite their small number, however, no group of slaves anywhere, at any other period in history, has left such a large repository of testimony about the horror of becoming the legal property of another human being.

The black slave narrators sought to indict both those who enslaved them and the metaphysical system drawn upon to justify their enslavement. They did so using the most enduring weapon at their disposal, the printing press. Sometimes serving an apprenticeship in rhetoric and oratory on the antislavery lecture circuit, these individuals would publish accounts of their lives and times in the house of bondage, narratives that were polished, formal extensions of the speeches that they delivered. Sometimes these were dictated, as in the case of Mary Prince, but more often than not they were "written by themselves," a crucial argument in the discourse of race and reason. These slave narratives came to resemble one another, both in their content and in their formal shape. So similar was their structure that it sometimes seems to the modern reader that the slave authors were drawing upon shared patterns, and then imposing these patterns upon different pieces of cloth. There can be little doubt that when the ex-slave author decided to write his or her story, he or she did so only after reading, and rereading, the telling stories of other former slaves who preceded them as authors.

In the process of imitation, revision, and repetition, the black slave's narrative came to be a communal utterance, a collective tale, rather than merely an individual's autobiography. Each slave author, in writing about his or her personal life experiences, simultaneously wrote on behalf of the millions of silent slaves still held captive throughout the Caribbean, Latin America, and the American South. Each author, then, knew that *all* black slaves would be judged—on their character, integrity, intelligence, manners, and morals, and their claims to warrant emancipation, citizenship, and equality—on this published evidence provided by one of their number. The slave authors therefore had to satisfy the dual expectations of shaping the random events of their

lives into a meaningful and compelling pattern—just as all autobiographers do—while also making the narrative of their odyssey from slavery to freedom an emblem of every black person's potential for higher education and the right to be free. This was no easy task. Nevertheless, the ex-slave author met this challenge squarely, creating the largest body of literature ever created by former slaves and giving birth thereby to the African American literary tradition.

In 1969, the poet and novelist Arna Bontemps put the matter well in a statement about black literary ancestry that has influenced African American literary history ever since:

> From the narrative came the spirit and vitality and the angle of vision responsible for the most effective prose writing by black American writers from William Wells Brown to Charles W. Chesnutt, from W. E. B. Du Bois to Richard Wright, Ralph Ellison and James Baldwin.[2]

The first century of the African American literary tradition was created when its authors and their black readers were all slaves, former slaves, or descendants of former slaves. In fact, the first nonfiction work by an African American was Britton Hammon's slave narrative published in Boston in 1760. Have there ever been more curious origins of a literary tradition, especially when we recall that the slave narrative arose as a response to, and refutation of, claims that blacks lacked reason, therefore could not write, and therefore were somehow less than human?

Since the status of the slave narrative as history and literature seems self-evident to us now, how could the narratives have been "lost" to us for such a long period in American literary history and slave historiography? How indeed, especially when the apparent "silence" of the black person was drawn upon by a host of commentators as "evidence" of either the unrelentingly brutal environment of slavery or else of an inherent mental deficiency within the slave? After all, slave narratives were extraordinarily popular texts. Here is just a sampling of how well they sold: According to Charles H. Nichols, "At least six editions of Charles Ball's *Slavery in the United States* were issued between 1836 and 1859. By 1856, *Narrative of the Adventures*