

Despite some of the film's shortcomings, I will continue to use *Los Sures* in my courses, and would recommend it for other ethnic studies, sociology and anthropology courses. Careful interpretation, follow-up discussion, and supplementary readings are a must for this powerful, complex portrayal of a Puerto Rican community in transition.

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**Henry Louis Gates, Jr., ed. *The Classic Slave Narratives*. (New York: New American Library, 1987) xviii, 518 pp., \$4.95 paper.**

At last here is a compact, inexpensive paperback that presents the major black autobiographies of the slave era. It is easy now for teachers of literature, history, or sociology to have their students reading the full texts of the classic slave narratives, instead of just reading bits and pieces of them in anthologies. Henry Louis Gates, Jr., provides an informative introduction to the volume, which consists of works by Olaudah Equiano, Mary Prince, Frederick Douglass, and Harriet Jacobs. Gates notes that these texts “span nearly three-quarters of a century (1789-1861); the authors, two men and two women, include one African, one West Indian, and two African Americans, thereby helping us to understand the full range of the black experience in slavery.”

Most readers of African American literature are familiar with Frederick Douglass's 1845 *Narrative*, and they probably have his work in mind when they think about the slave narrative content and form. They recall Douglass's graphic descriptions of his wretched condition as a slave, his physical fight with the overseer, Mr. Covey, that marked the turning point in Douglass's life from a slave to a man, and his strong desire for freedom and eventual escape to the North, which allowed him to develop as a person despite the prejudice he encountered in the free states. Few people know, however, that Douglass's *Narrative* owes its existence to the first great slave autobiography published in 1789 in Great Britain and soon after in America. *The Interesting Narrative of the Life of Olaudah Equiano* was a two-volume work that became the prototype for the genre that developed in the nineteenth century and culminated in the fine achievement by Douglass.

Equiano combined the spiritual autobiographical form with the secular personal writing exemplified by Benjamin Franklin, and added ideas of social protest current in the emerging humanitarian movements of the late eighteenth century. Following these structural patterns and thematic elements, Equiano wove a fascinating but disturbing tale of personal striving for freedom that was tied to the social, historical,

economic, political, and psychological conditions of the Western world, especially to its immoral practice of human bondage. To read Equiano's story is to enter a world of adventure that offers enlightenment and human compassion. Above all, we gain an appreciation of what we owe him for his classic work.

Because most of the slave narratives were written by men, there is very little that we know about the interior lives of slave women. For this reason alone, *The History of Mary Prince* (1831) is valuable. She was born in Bermuda and was the first woman to publish a slave narrative. Gates writes that "Prince's account makes her readers acutely aware that the sexual brutalization of the black woman slave—along with the enforced severance of a mother's natural relation to her children and lover of her choice—defined more than any other aspect of slavery the daily price of her bondage." For example, one of the worst experiences she recalls in her account is the humiliating job of having to wash her master as he sits naked in a tub of water.

Harriet Jacob's 1861 *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* is another autobiography that has been receiving growing critical attention because it presents a viewpoint that is lacking in most narratives. Jacob's work not only illustrates the experiences different from men that women slaves underwent, it also demonstrates the various ways women related their ordeals under slavery. As Mary Prince does to some degree, Jacobs describes how she lives in constant fear of sexual exploitation and how she suffers tremendously for her refusal to succumb to the improper advances of her master. She chooses self-incarceration in a small garret crawlspace rather than acquiesce to a life of sexual domination by her master. Unlike the major emphasis of the male slave narrators who strive for their individual freedom in the manner of the Emersonian self-reliant person, Jacobs is preoccupied in maintaining her self-respect and close ties within her family circle that includes her children whom she desperately tries to save and her grandmother in whose attic she conceals herself for seven years.

All these narratives will introduce students of black studies and general readers to the most absorbing and revealing pieces of lifewriting that came out of the slave era. After examining these works, most persons will understand why so many scholars are presently at work studying these fine literary achievements that somehow emerged from one of the most brutal periods in the history of the modern world.

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