Black Women in American Literature: Slavery Through Slave Narratives and Contemporary Fiction

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To the modern individual, slavery of any kind is an undeniable wrongdoing. Although enslavement has not been completely wiped from the earth, it is no longer widely justified on the surface level of our society; such as it was in early America. Slavery is nonetheless a subject that has been on the minds of countless people for millennia, and the United States of America was no exception. The most useful and thought-provoking aspect that rose from slavery in America was the slave narrative, which has been deemed "the genre that began the African-American literary tradition in prose" (Mobley 357).

Since the abolition of slavery and the thinning of the final generation of ex-slaves, slave narratives eventually stopped being produced, but the end of the slaves did not mean the end of their place in literature. There are several modern black female writers who carry on the tradition of analyzing slavery and making sure that it is not forgotten. Among these women are Toni Morrison, Alice Walker, and Octavia Butler, who have revived the slave tradition in their quest to reveal its dark underbelly and its continued effects on people.

Fictionalized slave tales can force the understanding of the history and institution of slavery in America, just as slave narratives were during their time. Fantasy can have the effect of revealing a topic in a way that opens it to a wider audience, which is what these authors use to keep the knowledge of slavery in the light and unburied by time. Their work is comparable to the slave narratives of black female slaves such as Harriet Jacob's *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*. All of these women have used their writing to touch upon many issues of slavery. Their works discuss the troubles experienced within slavery—jealous mistresses, sexual exploitation, intelligence as a blessing or curse, community, and motherhood – as well as those that extended past the abolition—continued servitude, the pains and rewards of remembering, and the search for self-worth—and even the issues faced and decisions made by black women in the process of writing and publication, such as linear versus cyclical narratives and audience.

In 1861, Harriet Jacobs published her life story under the title *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* (Andrews xxv). It was the first slave narrative by an African American woman, and also one of the longest and most detailed accounts of slavery at the time of its publication (Andrews xxv). Unfortunately, it was overshadowed by the Civil War and was not truly revived until the 1970s and '80s, when it became the most widely known African American woman's text from the 19th century (Andrews xxv). Jacobs, like most slave narratives, tells the story of her life in slavery and escape to freedom. Unlike most male slave narratives, she breaks the ideas of black women as defenseless and pathetic objects of lust (Andrews xvii). Instead, she uses her sexuality and intelligence to escape further exploitation by her masters, and obtains freedom, not just for herself, but also for her children (Andrews xxvi).

A central part of her narration resides with her sexual exploits with an unmarried white man, who she refers to as Mr. Sands. Throughout the narrative, she works hard to redeem herself by being a self-sacrificing mother (Andrews xxvii). Despite any regrets that she may or may not have had concerning her exploits with Mr. Sands, Jacobs was bound to meet the needs of a specific audience and was writing for a specific purpose. Most slave narratives before the Civil War were written with two goals: to help the individual assert their identity in the world and serve the purposes of the abolition movement. Jacobs' narrative was written to serve the same purpose, but was primarily focused on a particular audience: white women (MacKethan "Frederick Douglass and Harriet Jacobs: American Slave Narrators"). In William L. Andrews' *Classic African American Women's Narratives,* he describes her desire to "forge a bond of sympathetic identification between white women of the North and 'slave mothers' of the South" (Andrews xxvi). Her narrative is considered a "domestic novel" since it was written by a woman, for women, with a focus on family, motherhood, female chastity, and domesticity. It is because of these standards that she had to narrow her experience to what would fit into the mold and be experienced comfortably by the feminine minds, which had exceedingly shallow knowledge of the "real South" (MacKethan "Frederick Douglass and Harriet Jacobs: American Slave Narrators").

On top of the standards set for her narration due to her gender, there were also general guidelines for slave narratives that she had to meet to be published. The first of these was having a white person acknowledge her work and writing a piece—be it a letter, preface, or forward—for her narrative to "prove" that it was not a falsehood (MacKethan "Frederick Douglass and Harriet Jacobs: American Slave Narrators"). This need arose from the deep belief at the time that blacks could not be trusted and only the approval of a white person—Lydia Maria Child in Jacobs' case—could assure readers that the work was not fictional and worth reading (Andrews xxv). Two other conventions of slave narratives were (1) a description of how the narrator learned to read and write and (2) a clear presentation of their Christianity. The latter was a part of why Jacobs stated her case carefully, especially concerning Mr. Sands and what shaped her narrative into the story of a self-sacrificing mother repentant for her sin, but persevering for the sake of her children's well-being and freedom (MacKethan

"Frederick Douglass and Harriet Jacobs: American Slave Narrators.")

Many of the themes represented in *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* can also be found in the modern interpretations of slavery written by black women. Perhaps the most striking difference between the slave narratives and modern pieces concerning slavery is the matter of audience. While Jacobs had a specific audience and intention—to bring white women further into the sphere of the abolition movement—authors today have no specific agenda for their writing. They have no need to rely on a particular audience, at least not to the extent of hiding the truth for the sake of self-preservation—a way that African Americans had to during a time in which the world still believed them to be a sort of sub-species of human. For example, Jacobs had her narrative published under the false name "Linda Brent," to save herself and others in the narrative from the possible backlash of the piece, especially due to her recollections concerning female sexuality (Andrews xxvi). There was also the issue of not being "too upsetting" for the white audiences of the time, from whom the books were being written partly to gain support (Carmean 830). It was this sort of inevitable censorship that Toni Morrison, in her research for her novel, *Beloved*, was disappointed by. She believed that "the full, ugly truth" of slavery could not really come through slave narratives "because they were adjusted for nineteenth century abolitionist readers" (Carmean 83).

Toni Morrison's *Beloved* is described as a "modern day rendition of the nineteenth-century genre of the slave narrative" which covers many of the themes addressed in slave narratives such as *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*, including the pains of motherhood, sexual exploitation, learning self-respect, the desperate escape to freedom, and the struggles faced even after "freedom" has been reached (Elbert 38). Morrison claimed to have written *Beloved* as a reactionary piece to the "'national amnesia' surrounding the details of slavery and its aftermath" (Carmean 81). She was concerned by the African Americans' reluctance to talk about slavery, "not the blacks, not the whites wanted to remember" (Carmean 81). This theme of remembrance is rooted deeply into her novel and branches throughout all of its characters. It is believed that Morrison originally looked to slave narratives, such as those by Jacobs and Douglass, for inspiration for her story (Snitow 358). Eventually, Morrison stumbled upon a newspaper article from 1855 about a runaway slave named Margaret Garner, who, partially due to the effects of the Fugitive Slave Law, killed her baby rather than give it to a life of slaverya horrific event that is mirrored in Morrison's novel (Snitow 359).

The novel starts some years after Sethe's escape from slavery, and opens on Sethe and her daughter, Denver, living in the decrepit home of the deceased Old Baby Sugg, which is possessed by the spirit of the baby, Beloved (Atwood 33). Although it is not quickly realized in the beginning of the book, it is eventually revealed that not long after Sethe's escape from slavery, she was faced with possibly seeing her children enslaved by the cruel slave owner who came looking for them. In a desperate attempt to assure the freedom of her children, she attempts to kill them, but only succeeds in killing one of them, a young, unnamed girl. This act of infanticide saves her other children and herself from slavery, but at the cost of losing of a part of her humanity and being completely ostracized by the community (Carmean 84).

It is this act of infanticide that primarily drives the story, each moment as entrenched in the pains of slavery and its aftermath as the next. The deceased baby becomes known as Beloved, because Sethe had wanted "Dearly Beloved" carved on the tombstone, but the payment for each word on the gravestone was ten minutes of sex with the engraver, and Sethe, in her grief-stricken and weakened state, could only manage payment for one word (Atwood 32). This is just one of many examples of how slaves were not truly free or happy, even after the Civil War and during the Reconstruction, and that black women especially were still submitted to many of the perils of a slavery-minded society (Atwood 32).

As Sethe killed Beloved to save her from the future perils of slavery, she raised her other daughter, Denver, by attempting to keep her from the past (Mobley 360). This is a theme that carries itself throughout the book, and reflects the ideas that Morrison felt were circulating in the modern world—the desire to forget something because of how horrific it was, rather than facing it. The characters in the novel are forced to face the past when Paul D, one of the other slaves who had tried to escape "Sweet Home" at the same time as Sethe but had been captured and resold into slavery, shows up at Sethe and Denver's home (Snitow 28). It is Paul D's presence and his ability to help Sethe move forward, that drives Beloved from a household phantom to become flesh and blood (Atwood 35).

Beloved physically manifests, and even though she originally appears innocent, it is soon realized that she has returned as an evil force (Snitow 28). Beloved becomes "a snare to catch her anguished, hungry mother's heart and keep her in the prison of guilt forever (Snitow 28). It is through Beloved that Sethe becomes a slave again, both to the sins of her past and her all-consuming love for Beloved (Carmean 90).

The curse of Beloved is lifted once Denver pulls away from the isolation and grief of her home life and reaches out for help from the community. The novel ends with all of the injured mothers of the black community exorcising the ghost of Beloved, who represents all the children lost in one way or another to the cruelties of slavery and its aftermath, from Sethe's home. By uniting in spiritual communion and song, they are able to come to terms with their guilt, and Sethe learns that she needs to replace her "mother love" with self-love and respect. It is once she does this that she is able to rediscover herself and her own power (Elbert 39).

Beloved is a story about trying to forget (Mobley 461). As stated in Karen Carmean's book, *Toni Morrison's World of Fiction,* "they must be willing to look back on their past experiences, however dreadful those might have been, so that a kind of purging, cathartic recovery can occur, a process of recovery ending in a fuller self-realization and a discovery of personal worth. It is then that the characters can feel truly free, escape their death-like obsessions, and reclaim their lives" (Carmean 86). As Morrison makes clear, forgetting does not erase the scars and wrongdoings of the past, but can become a new, darker form of oppression. She shows us the dangers of repressing our pasts and our identities, primarily through Sethe, who is unable to move forward because of her sorrow, guilt, and inability to face the truth of her past. She also makes it clear that the effects of slavery did not die with the Civil War. Both Sethe and Jacobs had to face the dangers of the Fugitive Slave Act, which allowed slave masters to pursue their escaped salves across state borders, into the North (Elbert 38).

Morrison, like Jacobs, also focuses on the ideas of family and motherhood. Jacobs and Sethe use their love in a sacrificial way, and place the value of their lives onto something other than themselves: their children (Carmean 82). Sethe sacrifices her role as a "loving" mother and a member of the community to save her child from the clutches of slavery. She becomes an outcast viewed as beast-like for her actions. She is also constantly haunted by the past and is essentially robbed of any hopes for a future.

Jacobs, on the other hand, lives her life on the basis of a future free of slavery for her children and aligns most of her actions as those of a mother working to free her children. After refusing to become a concubine for her master, Mr. Flint, she is sent to a plantation. When she discovers that her children are to be taken from the home of her grandmother, a free woman, and brought to the plantation, she decides to escape. She spends several years in a small crawlspace in her grandmother's attic, silently watching her children grow without her. She eventually escapes to the North, where she is reunited with her children, who have been bought and freed by their father, Mr. Sands (Yellin 23338). It may also be noted that as it was with Denver, Jacobs was not able to overcome slavery and escape until she reached out into her community and accepted the help of her grandmother.

Morrison's *Beloved* and Jacobs' *Incidents* mostly differ on their audience and their narration styles. Morrison, unlike Jacobs, does not write for a white audience and does not need to convince white readers of a slave's humanity. If anything, she invited black readers to reassess their pasts that may be "repressed, forgotten, or ignored" (Mobley 363). Also unlike *Incidents, Beloved* is not chronological, but jumps between past and present for the characters, highlighting their actions and the consequences, as well as reminding the reader that the past cannot be forgotten and will keep rearing its head to interrupt their present (Mobley 358). It also inverts the usual slave narrative style by having the escape to freedom precede the actual storyline's true slave period—that of Sethe to Beloved.

Toni Morrison touches upon some of the deepest and most disturbing elements of slavery and its possible effects on black women. Slavery is an institution that treats human beings as merchandise, not allowing the strong sense of family and community that humans so desperately need. As stated by Ann Snitow in her essay, "Beloved (1987)," "when strong, loving women would rather kill their babies than see them hauled back to slavery, the damage to every black that inherits that moment is a literal damage and not a metaphor" (Snitow 29). *Beloved* makes the grief of such an act and its causes palpable (Snitow 29). It is not until the reader is faced with Beloved, and not just her memory, that the decision and the reasons behind such an act take on their true weight. This is how she makes slavery "real" for the readers who do not view slavery as a memory of their own, but as a historical fact that can be much easier to repress and forget (Mobley 358).

The Color Purple by Alice Walker is a widely-known story about the occasionally terrible black female experience in America. Although not a slave in the conventional sense, Celie is trapped in her own belief that she is unworthy of love and is unable to stand up for herself as a wife, woman, or even as a human being. The novel captures her life and her "progression from sexually abused child to passive spouse to outspoken equal partner" (Kelly 75). Sexually abused by her father in childhood and told to keep it to herself, Celie grows up believing that she is not worthy of love and the understanding of others. This leads to her eventual marriage to a man that does not love her and takes what he wants from her as he pleases.

Celie lives a life of silent unhappiness until she meets Shug, an outspoken, sexual powerhouse of a woman, and a performer who has the full attention and heart of Celie's husband. Shug helps teach Celie to respect herself and that she can and deserves to be loved (Kelly 75). Shug uses her bisexuality to teach Celie that, "the ability to give and receive love is more important to one's growth than whom one loves" (Kelly 76). This lesson is a cornerstone to Celie's progression, as she had never known what it was like to be touched and loved, rather than manhandled and taken.

The Color Purple is an epistolary novel, a compilation of Celie's letters to God. She started the journal after her sexual abuse in childhood, when she was told that she'd better tell no one but God about her misfortunes or risk severe harm (Kelly 75). Celie's progression is also witnessed in the format of the letters. When she starts the journal, she does not sign her name, and prefers anonymity because she feels safer not truly claiming the life she lives as really her own (Kelly 75). As she grows into herself, she takes the step of signing the letters with her name, thereby taking credit for her writing and her life (Kelly 77). Both *Incidents* and *The Color Purple* tell their stories through the eyes of the protagonists.

Both are chronological accounts in the lives of black women vying to free themselves from their oppressors. Both protagonists also prefer anonymity at some point in their writing. Celie starts her journal as an anonymous account to God. Jacobs also does not claim her experiences. It is clear that the population did not always embrace the black female voice. Fortunately for Celie, she does eventually claim her life and her account of it, whereas Jacobs published her account under the fake name Linda Brent, not yet willing to take her story unto herself.

At its core, *The Color Purple* is a story of a black woman in the early twentieth-century who eventually, after many trials, realizes self-hood (Kelly 75). It is through self-expression, in the form of her letters and female bonding, that allow Celie to embrace and love herself (Kelly 75). Although it is not a contemporary slave narrative of any kind, since the characters are not slaves, the novel also has many parallels with black female slave narratives such as *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*. Though there is not really a strong sense of family in the novel—though Celie's love for her sister plays a somewhat large role throughout the book—there is the theme of female bonding. Whereas Shug helps Celie reach her own sort of freedom—selfhood—Jacobs' grandmother and aunt help her reach literal freedom in the North by hiding her and caring for her children. Without this sense of female bonding and community, both protagonists would have most likely remained in their chains.

There are also the very clear themes of oppression and sexual exploitation in both accounts. While the institution of slavery oppresses Jacobs, Celie is just as entrenched in the institution of marriage. There is a thin line between husband and master in *The Color Purple,* as Celie is so soft-spoken as to be almost slave-like, unable to talk back for fear of physical harm and trained to believe that she is indeed owned by her husband. Both also use their sexuality to pry themselves from their situations—Jacobs with Mr. Sands and Celie with Shug. In this way, they use their sexuality as a small step towards reclaiming themselves.

Like Toni Morrison's *Beloved*, Alice Walker's *The Color Purple* also touches upon the aftermath of slavery. Both Sethe and Celie live, at least part of their lives, free of the chains of slavery, but are still affected by the stigmas attached to slavery and therefore, to black women. Black women are still viewed as lowly beings, and often treated as such. In *Beloved*, Sethe is ostracized for her beastly act of infanticide and isolated like a caged animal in her own suffering and guilt. Celie is treated as an animal by her husband, who expects her to do all of the housework and give him sex whenever he pleases, but they share no higher "human" connection. Both become slaves to something else—Sethe to her demented love for her dead child and Celie to her husband and her own inability to claim herself as a human being.

The Color Purple is a strong and undying testament to the cruelties of not just slavery, but the ideas and constructs of it. This novel shows that the issues created by slavery are not over simply because slavery as a wide-spread institution has come to a close. Celie is still trapped in a world in which she is denied self-worth because of her skin tone and gender. Many of the trials that she faced—sexual abuse, lack of self-respect, and the belief that she is unworthy of love and respect—can still be seen today. It is this fact that may help the reader connect with her plights and realize that her story is not just a figment of the imagination or past, but can very well be real and current.

Kindred, by Octavia Butler is a science fiction/fantasy novel with the qualities of a historical slave narrative (Steinberg 467). The novel appears as "an inverse slave narrative," with Dana, the black female protagonist, being born into freedom and entering slavery on her twenty-sixth birthday in 1976, the bicentennial year of the United States' independence (Steinberg 467). It is on this birthday that Dana is somehow sent back in time to a plantation in the Antebellum South, where her slave-owning ancestor, Rufus, is in danger. Dana is sent back in time at random intervals to save the life of Rufus whenever it is necessary to assure her own existence in the future—a process that dictates the direction of the narrative.

Most slave narratives have a succession of moments that the author experiences and chronicles, including their awakening to their situation—the realization that they are in fact slaves and wish to be so no longer—incidents of brutality and inhumanity upon the slave population, and the escape attempt (Wood 88). *Kindred* has these moments, even though they are all somewhat inverted due to the nature of the story line. Dana experiences brutality in the form of her first whipping, an aborted escape attempt, the dangers of slave education, and the threat of rape (Wood 88).

Dana is also faced with the trope—such as Jacobs was—of the jealous mistress, Margaret, who at one point douses Dana with a pot of hot coffee (Steinberg 471). This is partially spurred by yet another theme of slave narratives, following the power or curse of intelligent and educated slaves. Dana is unable to turn to the other slaves on the planation and therefore the story lacks the theme of black community, because of her eloquent, educated speech. She is accused of impersonating whites, getting her labeled by some of the other slaves as a "white nigger" (Steinberg 471). Dana also writes, but must destroy all evidence so that it cannot be used to manipulate her (Steinberg 472). As Douglass implied, education could be a curse. Dana's literacy "becomes both an asset and a liability" (Steinberg 474). When Rufus learns about Dana's literary abilities, he uses it to his advantage, as he is not very educated himself, even though it puts his father, Tom Weylin, on edge and makes Dana more of a target than a resource.

Dana also faces sexual exploitation, both in regard to herself and others. Rufus is in love with a slave named Alice, whose "body is at the disposal of her white master" (Wood 92). This situation is complicated by the fact that though Dana does not want to see the poor woman exploited in such a way, she believes that Alice may very well be her great-great-grandmother, and interjecting between her and Rufus' desires may lead to her never being born (Wood 92). Towards the end of the novel, Rufus' deranged, suppressed feelings of love, desire, and shame over Alice come to a head when he claims to have sent their children away, resulting in Alice committing suicide. It is at this point that Rufus turns his desires to Dana, whom he claims reminds him of Alice. In his attempt to rape her, Dana stabs him, ending her cycle of time travel. As she is finally transported back to her own time for good, Dana loses her arm where Rufus had gripped it. The author uses the loss of Dana's arm as a metaphor, for "Antebellum slavery did not leave people quite whole" (Steinberg 473). Thus, Dana loses a part of herself to the trials and cruelties of slavery, as all slaves and ex-slaves did.

Dana's reactions to all of the acts and the ways of life in the Antebellum South are received through the lens of a twentieth-century mind, not that of an actual slave woman of the time and place. Her feelings are also complicated by the fact that her tormentor, Rufus, is essential to her birth sometime in the future, making "the oppressor and the oppressed…tightly bound to one another" (Steinberg 468). As *Kindred* chronicles Dana's flight from Rufus, her white slave-owning ancestor in the distant past, it also parallels with her present. Butler makes it clear that the issues Dana faces are not left completely to the distant past, but echo even into her own "enlightened" time.

In *Kindred*, there are hints dropped that imply that Dana's marriage to a white man, Kevin, may be a much looser form of slavery for her as a black woman (Steinberg 468). The 1960s and '70s were a time of social upheaval, one of the primary issues being interracial marriage, which was still illegal in some southern states into the 1960s (Steinberg 468). This can be seen when Kevin implies that once married, Dana should give up her writing and edit his manuscripts instead (Steinberg 469). As stated by Marc Steinberg in his article "Inverting History in Octavia Butler's Postmodern Slave Narrative," "the Western marital contract posits woman as possession in terms largely of a man's notion that his wife's body is an extension of his own" (Steinberg 469). This comparison is emphasized when Kevin is accidentally dragged into the past with Dana, and has to pose as her master. This also sheds a little light on Jacobs' situation concerning Mr. Sands, as the interracial relationship of Dana and Kevin also comes under heavy scrutiny, which is socially damaging for Dana but not for Kevin.

Dana's time is also rife with other social issues, especially for black women, including the sexism of the Black Power movement and the racism of the Women's Liberation movement (Wood 91). It seemed that black women, although not necessarily in chains, were still at the bottom rung of society. There was still the undeniable devaluation of black femininity rampant in the United States, a devaluation that contrasted with the Antebellum South, and helps readers see how different and yet how similar some of the issues for black women really were (Wood 91). Butler uses the meshing of the timeline between the Antebellum South and the "modern" America to show that the past still has an affect on the present, and how Dana, as a black woman, is affected by both.

Like the conventional slave narrative, *Kindred* does in fact tell the story of the narrator's journey from slavery to freedom, just not in the conventional sense. Like *Beloved*, *Kindred* has a cyclical narrative rather than a linear one, like most slave narratives. The story is not told from birth to freedom, but rather jumps back and forth not simply between times, but entire lifetimes (Steinberg 472). Dana is also comparable to Jacobs. Jacobs' position as a somewhat privileged slave is comparable to Dana's knowledge of the future and her education. Dana is put in a place of relative safety due to her abilities and knowledge, not unlike Jacobs, who was allowed a relatively comfortable childhood and was saved from possible beatings under the eyes of Mr. Flint, her master and sexual oppressor (Wood 85). There are also slight references to Douglass's narrative, especially in the description of Rufus's plantation, which resembles Douglass's descriptions of his birthplace near Easton in Talbot County, where *Kindred* takes place (Wood 85).

In *Kindred*, Octavia Butler uses the "Antebellum slave narrative form as a background for exploring issues of literacy in opposition to the reality of possession, oppression, and violence" (Steinberg 467). As a woman who is aware of both the conventions concerning black women in the 19th and 20th centuries, Dana is surprisingly capable of understanding both points of view, which gives a reader a deeper look into the life of a slave as well. There are several points throughout the book in which Dana is awakened to the difficulties of resistance (Steinberg 468). When Dana lives the life of a slave woman, she gradually becomes aware of how easy it can be to become acclimated to slavery when its immense force is constantly pushed down upon you (Steinberg 468). This is an interesting theme that is not present in the other novels.

Whereas the narratives and novels earlier discussed focus on a progression from some form of slavery to freedom—sometimes with a detour in-between, such as the case of *Beloved* – no other narrator or protagonist has been quite as honest and eye-opening to the pressures of slavery in the way that Dana is. It is so very easy for the modern reader to say that they would never allow themselves to live under slavery—they would run away, start a revolution, kill themselves—but Butler helps the reader realize that slavery was not just on the southern plantations in a distant time, but was a way of life and a national stigma that was not completely erased, even into the twentieth-century.

A main theme that affects all four women—Jacobs, Sethe, Celie, and Dana – is the threat of sexual exploitation, which was perhaps the primary form of oppression and danger for black women both in and out of the confines of slavery. If Sethe wants a gravestone for her dead baby she must be willing to have sex with the engraver. Celie has been raped most of her life, first by her father, and later by her husband, which has stunted her ability to receive or give love. To escape concubinage by her master, Mr. Flint, Jacobs had to give herself to another white man, tarnishing her "reputation" at a time when pregnancy out of wedlock was an abomination, and set a stake between her and her once loving grandmother. Dana must make the choice between being sexually overcome by her ancestor or ending the cycle with the possibility of ending her own existence. Rape is unfortunately a dire concern for all four women and "fear of rape is so habitual as to be common sense" (Abbandonato 1111). There is no doubt that out of any of the issues faced by women throughout history, it is rape that continues.

Literature has been one of the most useful tools in social change for most of mankind's history. Slave narratives were crucial to the black experience in America's slave era and were often used as tools of the abolition movement. These true accounts were written for a white abolitionist audience and had to meet certain guidelines to be published. Though the weight of these true accounts of slavery are not to be overlooked, slavery has become a topic also addressed in fiction, sometimes to a deeper effect.

Novels such as *Beloved, The Color Purple,* and *Kindred* use fiction to give us a deeper and possibly truer look into slavery. This is partially due to their freedom from a specific audience and much looser guidelines. These novels were also produced in an era in which a person, more specifically a black person, and most of all a black *woman*, did not have to be proven trustworthy by a third, *white* party. These authors were also able to see from a modern and past view of slavery, which may have given their work more depth, and gave them an insight into what is believed about slavery now compared to what actually was. Toni Morrison, Alice Walker, and Octavia Butler have all given contemporary readers a look into the lives of black women in the context of slave-driven America. They have done this in fiction as those like Jacobs did with their own life stories. These novels and narratives work together to give the modern world a sense of slavery's effects on the perspective of the black woman, both past and present.

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The slave narrative is a type of literary genre involving the (written) autobiographical accounts of enslaved Africans in Great Britain and its colonies, including the later United States, Canada, and Caribbean nations. Some six thousand such narratives are estimated to exist; about 150 narratives were published as separate books or pamphlets. In the United States during the Great Depression (1930s), more than 2,300 additional oral histories on life during slavery were collected by writers sponsored Contemporary slave narratives (also referred to as neo-slave narratives) include works such as Richard Wright's Black Boy and The Autobiography of Malcolm X, co-authored by Malcolm X and Alex Haley. Both works trace the narrator's journey from poverty and mental slavery or imprisonment to freedom achieved primarily through an awareness of new choices and options, a determination to overcome societal and self-imposed limitations, and a willingness to assume personal responsibility for transforming one's life. Wright's "black boy" â€” much like the authors of traditio