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“Staging a Different Kind of Rebellion: Fighting Racial Stereotypes as Resistance in Slave Narratives”

#### Abstract

Slave narratives do not display instances of rebellion in the usual sense of the word because formerly enslaved narrators could not include any threats of violence in their narratives. In telling their stories, however, the narrators did rebel against slavery, although their weapons consisted of words carefully chosen to testify against the horror they had undergone and witnessed and to fight racial stereotypes. When referring to black people, they used the usual labels only to question them and resist the dehumanization and prejudices inherent in racial categories. They questioned the concept of race itself through a network of images involving skin color and blood as vectors of ethnicity and identity, and they blurred the color line in many ways. Dehumanization by pro-slavery activists—and even abolitionists—was indeed the main issue black people faced and resisted against. By focusing on individuals and individual stories of conversion and redemption, they reclaimed their humanity.

« Mettre en scène une autre rébellion : le combat contre les stéréotypes raciaux dans les récits d’esclaves »

#### Résumé

Les récits d'esclaves ne contiennent pas de rébellion au sens attendu du terme car aucune menace de violence ne pouvait trouver place dans ces récits. En racontant leur histoire, les anciens esclaves se sont pourtant rebellés contre l'esclavage, mais leurs armes étaient des mots pour témoigner de l'horreur qu'ils avaient vécue et dont ils avaient été témoin. Pour parler des Noirs, ils ont utilisé les étiquettes habituelles mais pour les combattre et résister ainsi contre la déshumanisation et les préjugés inhérents aux catégories raciales. Ils ont remis en question le concept même de « race » grâce à un réseau d'images utilisant la couleur de la peau et le sang comme vecteurs d'ethnicité et d'identité, et ont ainsi brouillé la « ligne de couleur ». Leur déshumanisation par les esclavagistes – mais aussi par les abolitionnistes – était bien le principal problème contre lequel ils résistaient. En se concentrant sur les individus ils sont parvenus à reconquérir leur humanité.

#### Key words

Slavery, resistance, narrative, humanization, violence

#### Mots clés :

Esclavage, résistance, récit, humanisation, violence

#### Introduction

In the United States as well as in the West Indies and the rest of the slave societies of the Americas, enslavement was an oppressive system based on violence and coercion. It is no wonder, then, that it was met with many acts of rebellion, understood here as “resistance to an

established government”.<sup>1</sup> Long overlooked by historians, this rebellion is increasingly becoming an object of scrutiny at the same time as its definition widens. Since the late 20<sup>th</sup> century, historiography has indeed been acknowledging the agency of enslaved people and black Americans in general.<sup>2</sup> There is no doubt now that slave narratives, especially those written before the Civil War, were so many acts of rebellion, as they were written or dictated by formerly enslaved people who managed to escape from oppression. These narratives are filled with horrendous scenes of violence perpetrated on the enslaved, but there is hardly any trace of violence or threat of retaliation on the part of the enslaved themselves: abolitionists, black and white, took good care in avoiding any representation of the slave that could be perceived as dangerous or aggressive (Wood 211) and did not mention any revolt or revolution until long after they had occurred.<sup>3</sup>

This article relies on 53 narratives,<sup>4</sup> emanating from 47 narrators (43 formerly enslaved in the United States, 2 in the West Indies, and 2 in Africa and at sea) dictated or written between 1787 and 1865 and published either in book form or in newspapers in the United States, Canada, and Great Britain. Only autobiographies narrated in the first person are considered here, that is narratives written by the formerly enslaved themselves and whose authorship was scientifically proven, as well as dictated narratives in which the slave’s voice can be heard. Narratives written from a statement of facts by the formerly enslaved or those presented as biographies are thus excluded for the present study.<sup>5</sup> Although their differences and specificities must not be overlooked,<sup>6</sup> all these narratives share undisputable similarities, the most important being the way in which they depict slaves and black people in general. Historiography has shown that formerly enslaved people “wrote themselves into humanity”, as Henry Louis Gates wrote in 1987 (Gates 13), and scholars have turned their attention to a social history of slavery, focusing on people, for the past 40 years. The present article is inscribed in this trend but also aims at going further by showing how the narrators resisted the dehumanization of a whole group of people, not with stories of active rebellion, threats of violence, or examples of retaliation, but with words. They rebelled not only by showing that they were themselves human but by using words to humanize all the slaves and black people in general. The article will thus analyze their use of the usual labels assigned to them only to subvert them and how their use of a wide variety of vocabulary to describe Blacks and the blurring of the color line were means to fight against racial stereotypes.

## I) Labels

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<sup>1</sup> Slavery being a legal institution, a parallel can be drawn between this system and a government <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/rebellion> (accessed 4/11/2022)

<sup>2</sup> See Cécile Vidal’s two articles on resistance and rebellion in *Les Mondes de l’Esclavage*, or Manisha Sinha describing the role black people had in the abolitionist movement in *The Slave’s Cause*, to quote only two among the most recent examples.

<sup>3</sup> Sarah N. Roth analyses the presence of violence in slave narratives, and she delineates three trends: in the 1830s, narrators tended to associate manhood with retributive violence. Then, in the 1840s, mentions of violence on the part of the slaves disappeared. In the 1850s, there was a “glorification of male violence” (Roth 255).

<sup>4</sup> This corpus was gathered for my dissertation to be defended in June 2023 entitled “‘Such cruel pride of blood and color’: Reinterpreting Slave Narratives through the Lens of Blood and Skin Color.”

<sup>5</sup> It is, of course, extremely difficult to differentiate narratives which were really dictated from those which were entirely rewritten by their amanuensis. We will never know for sure which narratives reproduce the voice of the formerly enslaved, but modern tools like textometry can help find the voice of the enslaved when the narrative is compared to other writings by the amanuensis. For more details, see Marie-Pierre Baduel, “Looking for the Voice of the Enslaved: Dictated Slave Narratives and their Amanuenses” <http://lexicometrica.univ-paris3.fr/jadt/JADT2020/> (published 17/02/2021).

<sup>6</sup> Michael Roy warns against the risk of generic rigidification when studying slave narratives in “Récits d’Esclave Africain-Américain : Réflexions sur une Appellation Générique,” *Textes et Contextes*, Université de Bourgogne Centre Interlangues, TIL 2015 (HAL archivesouvertes.fr, 8/12/ 2015), no page number.

During the 19<sup>th</sup> century, debates about slavery moved from biblical arguments and a focus on slavery as a system of oppression to arguments against the enslavement of human beings. The issue of humanization became even more central after 1830 (McBride 1): indeed, the call for the gradual abolition of slavery was progressively replaced by the demand of immediate abolition, spurred by the foundation of the *American Anti-Slavery Society* and coining of a new slogan, “Am I not a man and a brother?”, accompanied by the picture of a kneeling slave in chains. However, in many abolitionist speeches and writings composed by white people, slaves were seen as a group, as abstract entities that needed to be saved, but were almost never presented as individuals. Very often they did not even have names.<sup>7</sup> In the slave narratives, also abolitionist writings but written or dictated by former slaves, not only do the enslaved have names, but the narrators use a great variety of vocabulary to describe them. Indeed, the labels used to designate a whole category of the population are questioned, and nuances are introduced. Humanity and identity are closely linked, and naming is part of giving an identity to the enslaved.<sup>8</sup>

The “n- word,” mainly used as an insult or a derogatory way to address Blacks even at the time,<sup>9</sup> is absolutely rejected by the narrators: the 29 narratives in which it appears feature it only in quotations or compound words.<sup>10</sup> In the corpus under study, it appears for the first time in Mary Prince’s story, a dictated narrative published in 1831 in England.<sup>11</sup> Among the narrators who quote this word, Frederick Douglass is the fiercest in condemning it. In his second autobiography, *My Bondage and my Freedom*, he devotes an entire paragraph to denouncing the discrimination he encountered in the North, contrasting it with the welcoming attitude of the Irish when he visited their island. He repeats “we don’t allow niggers in here”<sup>12</sup> nine times in three paragraphs, as if it were a leitmotif or an incantation, or as if he was preaching and wanted to make the message even clearer. The reader can feel Douglass’s anger in this passage and the repetition of this insulting sentence suggests the recurrence of the incidents it evokes. The 1845 narrative contains eleven occurrences of the “n-word” while there are twenty-three in the 1855 version, which shows that Douglass was more radical and maybe angrier in the second narrative compared to the first one.<sup>13</sup> His book is also part of a trend because the “n- word” is most often used in the narratives from 1853 on, which could be seen as an illustration of the mounting anger and intensifying fight leading to the Civil War.

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<sup>7</sup> One of the most notable exceptions is *The Key to Uncle Tom’s Cabin*, in which Harriet Beecher Stowe, the world-famous author of *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*, methodically illustrates every character and every story of the novel with real events and real people, mostly formerly enslaved, and she systematically gives their names.

<sup>8</sup> Naming is especially important in the context of slavery since enslaved Africans were deprived of their African names and renamed by their enslavers and, very often, slaves were given new names when they changed owners. Some narrators explain in their narratives that they decided to change names when they became free, and not only for fear of detection (William Wells Brown, for example, decided to take the name of his Quaker benefactor, Wells Brown, who helped him after he had escaped).

<sup>9</sup> “Although we do not know precisely when ‘nigger’ was first used self-consciously as a racial term of abuse, we do know that by the 1830s it was serving that aim” (Kennedy 79).

<sup>10</sup> The only exception to this rule is Peter Wheeler’s narrative, published in 1838, in which both Wheeler and his amanuensis, Charles Lester, use it freely, Wheeler as a perfectly acceptable way to refer to himself and Lester as a way to show his anger at slavery.

<sup>11</sup> The “n- word” does not appear in Ashton Warner’s narrative, even though it was dictated to the same person, Susanna Strickland, and published the same year as Prince’s, which shows that the narrators could master the vocabulary used in the narratives. It is also notably absent from Nathaniel Turner’s narrative, dictated to Thomas Gray and published in Maryland the same year.

<sup>12</sup> The “n-word” is totally unacceptable today. However, the whole point of this paragraph in Douglass’s narrative is to show how offensive and unacceptable this word is for Douglass. So, as I am quoting his words, I leave the quotation as it is, to avoid the risk of attenuating his anger.

<sup>13</sup> This example comes as another piece of evidence of the shift that occurred in the 1850s as shown by Sarah N. Roth in her previously quoted article.

On the contrary, “negro” is widely used (absent from only seven narratives, published between 1810 and 1861<sup>14</sup>), just as it was at the time. Indeed, we can find it as early as 1693 in an antislavery essay written by George Keith: “Negroes, Blacks and Taunies are a real part of Mankind, for whom Christ hath shed his precious Blood, and are capable of Salvation, as well as White Men” (Basker 4). It is very frequent throughout the 19<sup>th</sup> century and, as Randall Kennedy explains, “by the end of the nineteenth century a sufficient number of blacks embraced the term “negro” for it to emerge as an oft-used alternative.” However, it was not accepted by everyone, as Samuel E. Cornish makes it clear in one of his 1838 speeches (to quote only one example): “But what caps the climax is, that while these sages are frightened half to death, at the idea of being called COLORED, their FRIENDS and their FOES, in the convention, in the Assembly and in the Senate; through the pulpit and the press, call them nothing else but NEGROES, NEGROES, THE NEGROES of Pennsylvania” (Ripley volume 3, 263). Among the 47 narrators of the corpus, Harriet Jacobs<sup>15</sup>, or rather her son, whose words she quotes, is the only one to show her / his dislike for the word: “Benny ... came home very indignant with the stranger lady, because she had called him a negro” (Jacobs 457). For Kennedy, “negro” and “slave” [were] frequently used synonymously” (Kennedy 73-5) but we can notice that it is not always the case in the slave narratives. Indeed, 19 of the 47 under study in the present corpus use it to refer to black people in general and 13 of them associate the word with “free.” We can find examples throughout the period, in stories whose narrators come from very different states and who published their narratives in the United States, Canada, and Great Britain.<sup>16</sup> It shows that the narrators are questioning labels and do not always follow the general rule.

The word “African” is also widely used (38 narratives out of 53), but there are few occurrences in each narrative and what it refers to is problematic.<sup>17</sup> In the late 18<sup>th</sup> century and early 19<sup>th</sup> century, free Blacks preferred the word “African” but “general agreement is that the popularity of [African] declined after the founding of the American Colonization Society in 1816”<sup>18</sup> (Kennedy 73-5). In the narratives, “African” is used by the narrators who were born on the African continent to refer to people actually coming from Africa. This is the case of Olaudah Equiano, Venture Smith, and Boston King, who published their narratives between 1789 and 1798. For them, “Africa” refers to one single origin, erasing any belonging to ethnic groups or regions. Coming from people originating from Africa, it may seem surprising but we may hypothesize that they adopt the most commonly held belief that Africa, as depicted by explorers and abolitionists alike, was a single entity, characterized by a uniform virgin or savage landscape. George White is the first, in 1811, to use “African” to designate any black

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<sup>14</sup> George White (enslaved in Virginia and Maryland / narrative published in 1810 in New York), Selim Aga (between Darfur and Abyssinia, Egypt and England / 1846 in Scotland), Leonard Black (Maryland / 1847 in Massachusetts), William Green (Maryland / 1853 in Maryland), Richard Warren (North Carolina and Tennessee / 1856 in Canada) and Louisa Picquet (South Carolina, Georgia and Louisiana / 1861 in New York), the last one being the only dictated narrative from this list. We can imagine that this absence of the word “negro” was not a trend since the location of the narrators’ enslavement, the dates, and places of publication of the narratives are very different.

<sup>15</sup> Harriet Jacobs is the only woman who wrote her narrative herself. There are other women slave narratives, but they were either dictated to an amanuensis or they are clearly presented as biographies.

<sup>16</sup> To quote only two examples, William Grimes, who wrote his first narrative and published it in 1825 in Massachusetts: “I knew in New Haven indians and negroes, come from a great many thousand miles, sent to be educated,” (Grimes 82) and William Craft, who also wrote his narrative and published it in 1860 in England: “They have no mercy upon, nor sympathy for, any negro whom they cannot enslave” (Craft 37). Grimes was enslaved in Virginia and Craft in Georgia.

<sup>17</sup> “African” is used 261 times in the corpus, the “n- word” 463 and “negro” 707.

<sup>18</sup> This private society, founded by white Americans, aimed at sending free Blacks “back” to Africa, to Liberia once the colony had been founded by the ACS in 1822.

person, born either in Africa or in the United States or West Indies.<sup>19</sup> “African” becomes polysemous, referring to an origin, a “race”, and a skin color, the fact that all Africans are black being taken for granted.<sup>20</sup> In this, they follow the abolitionists, who often used this term while proslavery activists used the word “African” in essays and speeches related to the supposed origin of the “races”, in pseudo-scientific demonstrations which developed throughout the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> century but gained momentum in the 1850s, aiming at proving the inferiority of the “African race.”<sup>21</sup>

To designate racially mixed people, the words “mulattos” and “quadroons” are infrequently used in the slave narratives (although “mulatto” was frequent in bills presented to Congress and in newspaper articles). Indeed, “mulatto” appears 45 times in the whole corpus (in 14 narratives, covering the whole period under study<sup>22</sup>) and “quadroon” is even less frequent (10 times in 4 narratives, all of them published after 1847<sup>23</sup>). Similarly, “mulatto” is rather widely used while “quadroon” is relatively rare in antislavery books and pamphlets published in the Northern states and in Great Britain, particularly in the 19<sup>th</sup> century.<sup>24</sup> These two words, like the “n-word,” “negro,” and “African,” are labels used to designate a whole category, words reducing Blacks to one group. These words became synonymous with any black person, and although they did not clearly designate a skin color, they implicitly suggested it. Originally, “negro” comes from the Latin through the Spanish and Portuguese languages, meaning black, but it is used to designate a person with African origins, even if their skin color is closer to white. The notion of color *per se* has lost significance, and black becomes a racial denomination according to the process that Ben L. Martin terms “ethnogenesis” defined as “the process whereby ethnic groups come into being” (Martin 91). In a way, the narrators seem to participate in the making of a homogeneous group of people, defined by a supposedly black skin and a common origin, Africa (even if, as time went by, this origin was further and further on the ancestry line). However, what makes the slave narratives published before the Civil War unique in the antislavery discourse is that they resist essentialization by introducing nuance and varied vocabulary. Multiplying words to designate people also means multiplying people’s representations. To reach that goal the narrators emphasize the ambiguity of colors.

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<sup>19</sup> Only three narrators use “African” to designate a person born in Africa after 1811: William Grimes (1825 and 1855), John Brown (1855), and John Thompson (1856).

<sup>20</sup> John Jea is the only narrator to specify the color: “us poor black Africans” (Jea 119) and “I was a poor black African” (Jea 155) suggesting that this phrase was considered as pleonastic by the others.

<sup>21</sup> We can think, for example, of Josiah C. Nott, and Geo R. Giddon, and their famous book *Types of Mankind*, in which they defended polygenist theories and pretended to describe different “races” scientifically.

<sup>22</sup> Written narratives: Olaudah Equiano (1789), William Grimes (1825 and 1855), Frederick Douglass (1845 and 1855), Henry Bibb (1849), Peter Randolph (1855), Harriet Jacobs (1861), Israel Campbell (1861), John Andrew Jackson (1862), and Francis Fedric (1863). Dictated narratives: Mary Prince (1831), Ashton Warner (1831), Solomon Northup (1853), John Brown (1855), and Louisa Picquet (1861). To list the places of publication and where they were enslaved would be too long here but there is a great variety, showing that the use of this word is not accounted for by the region where they were enslaved or by the places where they published their narratives. Some, like Frederick Douglass and Harriet Jacobs, were famous and very active in abolitionist meetings while others, like Francis Fedric or Louisa Picquet, were not, which also shows that the use of this word was not contingent on whether the narrator was an activist or not.

<sup>23</sup> William Wells Brown (1847 in Massachusetts and 1849 in London), Solomon Northup (1853 in New York State), William Craft (1860 in London) and Francis Fedric (1863 in London - his narrative contains seven out of the ten occurrences). The dates and places of publication are different, as are the places where they were enslaved (Kentucky then Missouri, Louisiana, Georgia, Virginia then Kentucky respectively).

<sup>24</sup> One notable exception is Lydia Maria Child’s short story, entitled “The Quadroon,” and published in *The Liberty Bell* in 1842. In it, Child tells the story of a young, enslaved woman of mixed origin who falls in love with a white man, has a child with him and is then abandoned when the white man decides to marry a white woman.

## II) Colors and categories

To designate a color, “black” and “colored” are ubiquitous, whatever the circumstances in which the narratives were published. They also appear in pro- and anti-slavery writings alike. “Black” appeared in the 17<sup>th</sup> century whereas “colored” seems to be used from 1830 onwards, 1830 corresponding to the beginning of what is often considered as the “golden age” of abolitionism by historians (Sinha 5). Most narrators seem to use one or the other indifferently, sometimes in the same sentence. To give only one example, William Grimes seems to use “black” and “colo(u)red” to talk about free Blacks and slaves alike, without mentioning their skin color. He uses both in the same paragraph when alluding to “a colored man from Richmond” whom he helps and “Major Lewis, a black man,” a friend of his (Grimes 50).<sup>25</sup> However, there is a slight difference between narratives written by the slaves themselves and those dictated to an amanuensis. Indeed, “colo(u)red” is predominantly used in written narratives: “colo(u)red” and “black” coexist in 34 out of 37 written narratives and “colo(u)red” is predominant in 24, “black” in 8. The two words are present in 12 out of 16 dictated narratives but “colo(u)red” is predominant only in 6, “black” in 5. We can imagine that authors of written narratives had more control over their writing and that dictated narratives, even when the voice of the enslaved is heard, was a collaboration between the enslaved person and the amanuensis, a conversation between the two. The narrators sometimes use this word in the singular (“the black man”) or in the form of a metonymy (“my color”), which could be seen as a way of generalizing, as if casting the black man in stone. But “black” and “colo(u)red” are used to refer to both a color and a “race,” turning these two words into notions whose ambiguity can be emphasized, along with their absurdity when used as an argument to justify racial slavery. Narrators also use the plural and a variety of words to describe black people. The world the narrators depict in their narratives is seen and described in b/Black and w/White<sup>26</sup>: the color yellow, which was sometimes used as a derogatory synonym for “mulatto” (in Louisiana for example), is also relatively rare since it is used in only eight narratives. It is used as a neutral description, by Jacob D. Green for example when he refers to the “pretty yellow and Sambo gals” he is going to meet and court at the ball (Green J. 11) or as an insult, in an owner’s mouth in Douglass’s first narrative. After he tried to escape with other enslaved men, the owner of one of the other slaves calls him a “yellow devil” (Douglass 1845 128).

In the narratives, interestingly, the adjective which is most often used to designate people of mixed origin is “white,” in a complete reversal of codes, since it then refers both to a color,<sup>27</sup> and the racial identity of their oppressors. Rather than using another label (“mulatto”, “quadroon” for example) to essentialize racially mixed people and create a third group, separated from the other two (the Blacks and the Whites), they mix vocabulary and use different techniques to mix groups as well. Colors are not used as names for categories but as tools to subvert the concept of race as used in the slave societies. Hence, the idea of “passing” is rarely alluded to directly in the narratives, although it was of great concern at the time: in the general population, the fear was that if “black could be mistaken for white, then white

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<sup>25</sup> In the list of narratives under study here, William Grimes is the first author of a slave narrative to have fled to gain his freedom. He published a first version in 1825 and a second one in 1855 “brought down to the present time,” as the title announces. William Andrews considers his narrative to be “the first fugitive slave narrative in America” (Andrews 77).

<sup>26</sup> For a discussion about the capitalization of the word “white,” see Nell Irvin Painter, “Rethinking Capitalization” (23 July 2020) <http://nellpainter.com/cv.html#articles>. The pdf version of this article does not seem to be available on Painter’s website any longer but a shorter version was published in *The Washington Post* on 22 July 2020: <https://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/2020/07/22/why-white-should-be-capitalized/>

<sup>27</sup> White (and black for that matter) were not considered as a color until the middle of the 20<sup>th</sup> century (Pastoureau 11).

could just as easily be mistaken for black” (Hobbs 42). In antislavery circles, the idea of passing was used as an argument against slavery. As Henry Ward Beecher wrote, “as long as children who looked so white were enslaved, no white child was safe” (Applegate 6). By remaining silent on this issue, the narrators clearly indicate that they do not want to take part in the conversation about what category they belong to, thus challenging the very existence of categories. Only four narrators use the image of passing and all four published their narratives between 1846 and 1861, which confirms the greater importance given to whiteness and racial mixing in the 1840s and 1850s.<sup>28</sup> Only one narrator, William Grimes, uses the image of “passing”, but for a black man, himself: “[he] passes for a negro, though three parts white” (Grimes 1825 7), meaning that since his blood is mostly composed of “white blood,” he should be considered as a white man. This silence on the possibility of passing from one ethnic group to the other clearly shows that the narrators humanize all the slaves by negating the racial categories that were imposed on them, instead of just showing that they could change categories.

Indeed, from the long list of words used to describe black people in the narratives,<sup>29</sup> only three narrators use three or fewer than three.<sup>30</sup> Equiano uses seventeen words, adjectives and nouns combined, to talk about Africans and black people more generally, but he is an exception in his era. The largest variety of words used to refer to black people is found from 1849 onward, at the same time as theories on race were being released. The aim here is clearly to subvert racial categories: a variety of vocabulary means a variety of people and it also means that slavery based on race is nonsensical. Indeed, the white race was opposed to the black race, the former being systematically stated as superior to the latter. Using more than two words to designate people contradicted the idea of these two races, the words used by the narrators describing individuals, not a homogeneous group. This argument is confirmed by the way narrators designate white people: only four words are used, “white” for the most part, sometimes “fair” and “anglo-saxon”, and very rarely “buckra.”<sup>31</sup> The word “col(u)r” and its derivations are only used to refer to black people, in everyday English as in the slave narratives. A “colo(u)red person” or a “person of colo(u)r” is always a black person, which makes white a “non-color” or a color which does not need to be specified. The narrators thus define themselves and the other Blacks in relation to white and Whites. At first glance, they imitate the language of the dominant culture, but they stray away from it.

Naming concepts and people is of paramount importance in political discourse and slave narratives are undeniably part of the anti-slavery political arsenal, the concepts of blackness

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<sup>28</sup> John Brown: “She was as white as Ellen Craft: that is, she might have passed for a white person without fear of much detection” (Brown, J. 132), Milton Clarke: “describing me as a person five feet two and a half inches tall probably trying to pass himself off as white” (Clarke, M. 167), Harriet Jacobs: “the other was a free colored man, who tried to pass himself off for white, and who was always ready to do any mean work for the sake of currying favor with white people” (Jacobs, H. 442) and Israel Campbell: “I thought I would pass off as a white man, and I did not take off my hat”. Campbell also adds another argument concerning passing that only William Grimes and Henry Bibb developed before him: “passing” for white is also an attitude, not only a skin color (for more details about this idea, see Allyson Hobbs, *A Chosen Exile: A History of Racial Passing in American Life* (Cambridge, Mass. and London: Harvard University Press, 2014)).

<sup>29</sup> Here is the complete list: “African,” “Ethiopian,” “black,” “from Guinea,” “black African,” “mestinos,” “black slave,” “mulatto,” “brethren,” “my own nation,” “brown,” “my/our fellow + noun,” “my/our own colo(u)r,” “negro,” “colo(u)r,” the “n-word,” “colo(u)red,” “quadroon,” “my complexion,” “race,” “copper,” “sable,” “countrymen,” “skin,” “dark/ey,” “species,” “dusky,” “tawny,” “ebony.”

<sup>30</sup> Boston King (1798 in England - 7 “African” and 1 “negro”), Nathaniel Turner (1831 in Maryland - 1 “African” and 4 “negro”) and James Mars (1864 in Connecticut - 1 “colored”). The common point between these three narratives is that the narrators do not focus on slavery as a system, thus they do not reflect upon who is a slave. Since there are 53 narratives in the corpus under study, it would be too long to detail all the uses here.

<sup>31</sup> Only James Matthews in 1838 and William Craft in 1860 use this word.



and whiteness being central to it. Narrators primarily fought prejudice and stereotypes, which was the strongest means of all to rebel against the set categories and the institution of slavery, in the South as in the North, at the time. Unsurprisingly, proslavery activists and enslavers dehumanized slaves who were considered as property and they developed a series of stereotypes and generalizations to make the enslaved, and black people in general, fit their worldview. The fact that the enslaved were not considered as human beings was inscribed in law. Abolitionists, on the other hand, wanted slavery to be abolished but they were not necessarily free from stereotype and prejudice. Indeed, the kneeling slave in chains illustrating the new slogan of the *American Anti-Slavery Society*, “am I not a man and a brother?”, even though it contains the word “man”, depicts a victim that needs to be saved, not really a man whom no one has the right to enslave. The most famous fictitious slave character, Uncle Tom, in Harriet Beecher Stowe’s novel, *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*, published in 1852, is also a very pious man who does not rebel against his lot and who dies without defending himself. In society as a whole, for people who were not involved in the fight for or against slavery, stereotyped images of black people abounded: Sambo, the obedient slave, Mammy, the enslaved woman who was more maternal towards her master’s children than towards her own, or Jezebel, the temptress with an unbridled sexuality (Fox-Genovese 167-8). There were also numerous blackface and minstrel shows depicting happy, obedient, singing slaves (Fabian 109). They associated black skin with a set of supposed characteristics which their audience recognized. All this tended to dehumanize the slave and it created a context in which slave narratives were published. The narrators were certainly aware of this context, and they had to respond to these stereotypes and display a different representation of the enslaved.

The first goal of the slave narratives is to denounce slavery, which they do by describing the horrible treatment the slaves received, but also by showing how hypocritical slavery based on race is. Narrators highlight the discrepancy between the race that was assigned to them (they were considered as black, because one of their ancestors was black, even though their skin was sometimes (almost) white) and the race that was visible (they were considered as black because their skin was black). The community of black people is presented in terms of color, and more specifically in terms of shades of black and white. The attack on racial categories goes even further since the narrators question the very premise of the separation of races. Indeed, narrators are constantly challenging the categories of Blacks and Whites. The institution of slavery defined them in terms of blood and skin color: a slave was black and any individual with one drop of blood was considered as black. And only Blacks were slaves. However, in their narratives, narrators wonder what it means to call someone black if their skin is not black, thus blurring the color line.

### III) Blurring the color line

Narrators introduce nuances to highlight the individuality, and thus the humanity, of slaves and of black people in general, but also to denounce the very concept of racial slavery by turning their attention to “racially mixed” slaves.<sup>32</sup> After 1840, this argument that there were more and more children born of a white and a black parent (usually a white father and a black mother) becomes widely used in slave narratives and other abolitionist writings. The aims were, on the one hand, to fight the theories on races that were being developed, but also, on the other hand, to respond to pro-slavery activists who presented this “miscegenation” (to use a word coined in 1864<sup>33</sup>) as a potential consequence of the abolition of slavery, who thus pretended to ignore the fact that it was already happening. Focusing on “racially mixed”

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<sup>32</sup> Like the word race, this expression does not refer to a biological reality.

<sup>33</sup> For more details, see Sidney Kaplan, « The Miscegenation Issue in the Election of 1864 », *The Journal of Negro History* 34, n° 3 (1 July 1949): 274-343, <https://doi.org/10.2307/2715904> (accessed 22/02/2022).

children was primarily a way to denounce the sexual exploitation of enslaved women by their owners or the overseers, even if the word “rape” itself is absent from the narratives, and to criticize Southern men for their lack of morality. The particular way in which many narrators denounce it, however, is also efficient as racially mixed people are living examples of a blurred color line.

There are scenes in which Blacks with a very light skin are “mistaken” for Whites or scenes of revelation, which are sometimes full of irony. Henry Bibb, whose skin is almost white, wrote and published his narrative in 1849. He recounts that, one day, he was travelling on a boat and the captain invited him to have dinner at his table. The other guests, knowing that Bibb was an escaped slave, were reluctant to have him join them. An embarrassed captain then declared rather sheepishly: “I did not know that you was a colored man, when I asked you” (Bibb 428). The turn of the phrase reinforces the absurdity of the situation since a color is something you see, not something you “know.”<sup>34</sup> The same thing happened to Harriet Jacobs’s son, when his coworkers “learnt” that he was a black boy: “one day they accidentally discovered a fact that they had never before suspected – that he was colored! This at once transformed him into a different being. Some of the apprentices were Americans, others American-born Irish; and it was offensive to their dignity to have a ‘nigger’ among them, after they had been told that he *was* a nigger” (Jacobs, H. 499). Her tone is highly ironic, and she ridicules the employees. The shift in her sentence from “colored” to the “n-word” denounces the fact that racial labels are a mental construction and not a reality. By adding that some of these white Americans were Irish, she may have aimed at reminding her readers that Irish immigrants were sometimes called black in the 18<sup>th</sup> century (Hobbs 36).

Many narrators also use comparatives to show that the difference between a white person and a black person is sometimes extremely thin. Rather than using the concept of passing which was used at the time and which represented a danger for some (white) people, they use indirect means like describing situations when they were effectively mistaken for white people or by hinting at the fact that white people could pass for Blacks, although they do not actually use these words. They describe Whites who could “pass for” Blacks with the use of comparatives, in an ironic reversal. Comparatives also serve another purpose: they put the two elements that are compared on an equal footing. When Austin Steward (who wrote his narrative and published it in 1857 in New York State), declares: “True, God has given to the African a darker complexion than to his white brother ; still, each have the same desires and aspirations” (Steward 704), he clearly assesses the difference as a mere shade of color and this comparative is followed by a statement of equality on what makes them all human. He also uses the word “brother” to designate white people, maybe in an attempt to contradict polygenist theories which were popular in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. He dedicates a whole paragraph to this question, showing how important this issue was when dealing with the question of slavery. Harriet Jacobs uses the same techniques, a comparison and the word “sister”: “They played together as children; and when they became women, my mother was a most faithful servant to her whiter foster sister” (Jacobs 343). Similarly, the use of adverbs to qualify a color automatically reduces this color to what it is, a color, and not a race. To take a single example, when Harriet Jacobs describes her uncle as “nearly white,” (“He was a bright, handsome lad, nearly white; for he inherited the complexion my grandmother had derived from Anglo-Saxon ancestors” (Jacobs 342)), the reader understands that she is describing his skin color, not his racial identity, and also understands that skin color cannot be a reliable feature to define one’s race. It is a technique encountered in eighteen narratives, mostly when

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<sup>34</sup> The grammatical mistake is also interesting because there are none when Bibb writes and yet he chooses to put one in the mouth of a white man. Furthermore, “you was” is very often used when black people speaking in vernacular are quoted by white people. The reversal of roles is thus complete.

referring to white skin<sup>35</sup> but John Brown also describes his father as “very black” (Brown, J. 2).

Finally, several narrators choose to describe some white people with a dark skin and here the blurring is complete. This argument is not used by white abolitionists who prefer focusing on racially mixed people or white children sold as slaves.<sup>36</sup> Some narrators insist on shades of color. William Grimes describes a butcher who picked a quarrel with him: “I being a negro, as they called me, and the butcher a white man, although his skin was a great deal blacker than mine, I was put under \$500 bonds” (Grimes 1825 86). He uses the adjective “black” to describe a person designated as white to demonstrate the absurdity of these labels. Some narrators, like Grimes, insist on the fact that they are almost white throughout their narratives and the idea that some white people have a darker skin color than them is thus emphasized by contrast. Moses Roper may be the narrator who toys the most with the color line. He published his first narrative in 1838, and then a second one in 1848, and is thus announcing the insistence on the number of racially mixed children which became paramount in the abolitionist discourse in the 1840s. He ridicules the idea that one can recognize an enslaved person by looking at their physical appearance when he recounts the altercation between an overseer and his wife concerning Roper, the overseer claiming that Roper had “slave blood” in his veins and the wife disagreeing with her husband: “Though I was white at that time, he would not believe my story, on account of my hair being curly and woolly, which led him to conclude I was possessed of enslaved blood. The overseer’s wife, however, who seemed much interested in me, said she did not think I was of African origin, and that she had seen white men still darker than me” (Roper 1838 59 and Roper 1848 17). This quote is interesting because Roper mixes every supposed marker of an enslaved person: the slave status associated with blood,<sup>37</sup> the African ethnic origin, and skin color. All this combined suggests that the overseer and his wife do not know what to think. The wife finally convinces her husband that Roper is a white apprentice and not a fugitive slave like he thought. Roper also hints at the transience of skin color, since he was white “at that time.” However, throughout his narratives, he insists on the fact that his skin is really white and he gives many, sometimes contradictory, details about his origins but, at one point, he tells his readers: “the neighbors all around thought I was a white, to prove which I have a document in my possession to call me to military duty” (Roper 1838 80 and Roper 1848 47). He writes “a white” not only “white”, he does not refer to color anymore in this sentence but to an identity, to the white “race.” He goes beyond mere physical description here; he changes categories or groups and that may be the message he wants to deliver to his readers: he can pass for a White which shows that differentiating racial categories is senseless.

## Conclusion

Given the nature of the debate on slavery, which moved from theoretical and religious arguments to debates about the humanity of black people, humanizing slaves was the biggest act of rebellion of all for the narrators. Proslavery activists denied them this basic characteristics and conveyed stereotypes about their very nature while trying to defend the

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<sup>35</sup> Written narratives: Olaudah Equiano (1789), William Grimes (1825 and 1855), Moses Roper (1834 and 1848), Frederick Douglass (1845 and 1855). William Wells Brown (1848 and 1849), Henry Bibb (1849), James Pennington (1849), William Anderson (1857), William Craft (1860), Harriet Jacobs (1861), Israel Campbell (1861), and James Watkins (1860). Dictated narratives: Lewis and Milton Clarke (1846), Solomon Northup (1853), John Brown (1855), Louisa Picquet (1861), and Francis Fedric (1863).

<sup>36</sup> See Henry Beecher Ward’s quotation in part II. William Craft also alludes to this danger that white children could be kidnapped and sold as slaves in his narrative.

<sup>37</sup> “*Partus ventrem sequitur*,” the enslaved status follows that of the mother and is thus transmitted by blood.

institution of slavery. On the other side, abolitionists wanted to end slavery and acknowledged some basic humanity to the slaves, but it did not necessarily mean that they considered black people as equals. Society as a whole was created for, and around, white people, and prejudice and misrepresentations abounded. Narrators of slave narratives were thus telling their stories in a context which defined them and to which they had to respond. Humanization is, of course, achieved through the act of writing itself but also through the content of the narratives. Narrators reject labels and show how senseless rigid categories are, through a varied vocabulary to characterize black people and through a series of techniques that challenge the very concept of race. Blacks who look like Whites, Whites who look like Blacks, Blacks who are called Blacks but who have a white skin, Blacks who have many shades of complexion... What more convincing arguments could they find to denounce racial slavery? Moreover, distinguishing the slaves, showing them through their differences, restored their individuality and gave them an identity. The narrators of slave narratives used their pen and their voice to show slaves as human beings, they did not rebel with violent actions, they rebelled with words.

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