

Conclusion

Although Douglass, Northup, and Jacobs had gained (or re-gained in Northup's case) their freedom, all three testified to a strong sense of obligation to use their talents and hard-earned experience to witness publicly against the institution that still remained, when they penned their autobiographies, the law of the land. Having experienced enslavement first-hand, all three knew how dangerous it was for any formerly-enslaved African American to take freedom for granted or to assume that, having left the South, they had safely distanced themselves from slavery's tentacles. No one could testify more authoritatively as to this fact of African American life than Solomon Northup. Thus even after he had returned home, restored to his family to try to re-establish the life that had been so arbitrarily stolen from him, Northup, like Douglass and Jacobs, refused to retire to a less risky, more protective, and less public role in freedom. He realized the unique part his experience of enslavement could play in the national struggle, one that, from all appearances in his autobiography, had not engaged his attention at all before his kidnapping in 1841. After his return from what Douglass would have called "the tomb of slavery," however, Northup transformed himself from bystander to activist in order to contribute to the history of the slave narrative one of the most unforgettable tales of survival available to readers then or now.

Suggested Readings

William L. Andrews, *To Tell a Free Story: The First Century of Afro-American Autobiography, 1760–1865* (University of Illinois Press, 1986).

-----, Frances Smith Foster, and Trudier Harris, eds., *The Oxford Companion to African American Literature* (Oxford University Press, 1997).

Ira Berlin, *Generations of Captivity: A History of African-American Slaves* (Harvard University press, 2004).

Audrey Fisch, *The Cambridge Companion to the African American Slave Narrative* (Cambridge University press, 2007).

Frances Smith Foster, *Witnessing Slavery: The Development of Ante-bellum Slave Narratives* (University of Wisconsin Press, 1994).