

The African American Population in The United States After the Abolition of Slavery

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ABSTRACT

The objective of this text is to offer a general perspective on what was the slavery of the “afro-slave” population in the United States, from citing some of the most important authors who managed to survive the regime and endure after the abolition of the relations between masters and slaves and the self-legitimized violence by the former on the latter. We will do this by offering extracts from the most representative literary works and from the life testimonies of authors of African-American origin, including as complementary support, cinematographic and documentary references concerning the theme of identity, discursivities and related narratives, the imaginary under which the abolitionist ideal was taking shape in the nation and how said efforts were mostly impeded by the endogenous Caucasian racism of its rulers in particular, giving rise to and feeding as the main cause what would come together in the Civil War (1861 -1865) in that country.

Keywords: Slavery, African American population, United States, abolition, North-South.

La población afroamericana en Estados Unidos luego de la abolición de la esclavitud

RESUMEN

El objetivo de este texto es ofrecer una perspectiva general sobre lo que fue el esclavismo de la población «afroesclava» en los Estados Unidos, a partir de citar algunos de los autores más importantes que lograron sobrevivir al régimen y perdurar luego de la abolición de las relaciones entre amos y esclavos y las violencias autolegitimadas por parte de los primeros sobre los segundos. Lo anterior, lo haremos ofreciendo extractos de las obras literarias más representativas y de los testimonios de vida de autores y autoras de origen afroamericano, incluyendo como apoyo complementario, referencias cinematográficas y documentales concernientes al tema de la identidad, discursividades y narrativas relacionadas, el imaginario bajo el cual se fue conformando la ideal abolicionista en la nación y como dichos esfuerzos se vieron impedidos en su mayoría por el racismo endógeno caucásico de sus gobernantes en particular, dando lugar y alimentando como causa principal lo que confluiría en la Guerra de Secesión (1861-1865) en aquel país.

Palabras clave: Esclavitud, población afroamericana, Estados Unidos, abolición, Norte-Sur.

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Introduction

Starting from the Enlightenment, that is, at the end of the eighteenth century, European societies began to intellectually question the trafficking of black (African) population within and outside their nations, as well as the treatment and suffering to which they were subjected under various justifications found by traders, traffickers, and slave owners. It is worth mentioning the publication by Marie-Jean-Antoine Nicolas de Caritat, Marquis of Condorcet (1743-1794) - mathematician, philosopher, politician, perpetual secretary of the Academy of Sciences, enlightened, reformer, anti-slavery, anticlerical, profeminist, pro-Jewish, pro-Protestant, who also actively participated in the French Revolution in radical democratic positions - better known only as Condorcet, titled *Reflections on the Slavery of the Negroes* (1781), which was based not only on the principles of the revolution (equality, freedom, and fraternity) but also on natural law, which is and should be related to all men - and women. Condorcet considered that

Reducing a human being to slavery, buying him, selling him, keeping him in serf-like conditions are authentic crimes, worse crimes than theft. In fact, the slave is deprived not only of any monetary or real estate property, but also of the faculty to acquire the property of his own time, his forces, everything that nature has given him to preserve his life or satisfy his needs. To this harm is added that of taking away from the slave the right to dispose of his person (2017: 13).

The aforementioned work by Condorcet did not have a great impact at the time it was published; however, it was reissued in 1788, arousing open and heated debates, in which it is important to locate the author and his work at the epicenter of the intellectual, ideological, and political currents that led to the abolition of slavery as part of the Revolutionary Convention of 1794 and those that followed from here inside and outside the French nation. In this work, the French author threw overboard the argument that the slaveholders held about the "afro-slaves" under the yoke of their enslavement being of a different nature than that of the white population, and therefore deserved such treatment. The idea of the racial inferiority of the black population would become a constant and pervasive element in the cultural, political, and economic life of the European and later the North American societies that embraced slavery as a way of life and, above all, as a way of economic exploitation.

We will also see how abolitionist efforts and the promulgations that surrounded these political texts, in reality, often remained on paper without having positive effects on the daily lives and social realities, as the economic and political interests of slaveholders and those who benefited from this regime were the ones who viewed its abolitionist horizon with the greatest suspicion. An example of this was the technological advances applied to production that took place on plantations, many of which were achieved and expanded as a result of the Industrial Revolution in England and brought to American soil by the first colonizers and subsequent generations who benefited from this. These technological advances and economic objectives gave a new twist to the ways in which racism and other forms of discrimination were exercised in American lands, but they were not eradicated, nor much less, as recognized abolitionists at the time in various parts of the world, such as Condorcet, would have wanted.

We will show that there was no goodness or humanism in the intentions of those who were responsible for abolishing slavery and making it valid throughout the territory of the United States. Among these pragmatic politicians were the founders of the nation, such as Washington and Jefferson, on the one hand, and the champions of republicanism and defenders of the Union, such as Lincoln. The true concern of the latter was to save the "Union" and stay in power, as there would be a way to reconfigure the country structurally and socioeconomically, as both sides had very different cultures and interests.

Life and Literature. Abolition in Process (Some Sources)

Frederick Douglass was an African American abolitionist, social reformer, orator, writer, and statesman. He was born on February 14, 1818 in Maryland and died on February 20, 1895 in Washington. His most famous work, *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, an American Slave*, was first published in the spring of 1845. The book, which included introductory comments by William Lloyd Garrison and Wendell Phillips, quickly became a bestseller. Within three years of its publication, 11,000 copies had been printed in the United States. During the same period, nine English editions of the work had been published and it had been translated into French and Dutch.

Other successful works on the same topic include *The Interesting Narrative of the Life of Olaudah Equiano or Gustavus Vassa, the African* (1789), *Narrative of Moses Roper's, Adventures and Escape from American Slavery* (1837), *The Narrative of William Wells Brown* (1847), and *The Narrative of Solomon Northup* (1853). These works also sold thousands of copies and had multiple editions and reprints in the United States, as well as translations into German, Dutch, and other languages. Together, they helped to attract broad circles of European societies that practiced slavery and the intercolonial struggle outside Europe between 1820 and 1860 to the abolitionist cause.

According to Houston A. Baker, Jr., who wrote the introduction to a 1982 edition of Douglass's work, when researchers George Fredrickson and Christopher Lasch claim that "there simply are no adequate records of slaves' personal reactions to slavery," they are not questioning the authenticity of the narrators. Rather, they are recognizing that the accounts of former slaves are more important as "authentic" expressions in a literary universe than in a historical one. If history has begun to move as a result of the recent interest in slave narratives and their narrators, the movement is primarily that of an intellectual history, a broad cultural history that does not simply consider the narratives as direct documentary historical evidence. The history currently underway seeks to determine the relationship of the texts of slave narrators, which are (by their very nature autobiographical) both literary and historical, to our interpretation of the American past and our elaboration of a consensual history text (cited in Douglass, 1982: 6).

For Baker, "Slave narrators actually had literary aspirations. They were at once readers and timid authors of narratives that saw themselves as literary works of art, as autobiographical works performed both for literary posterity and on behalf of a contemporary mass of enslaved

African Americans” (cited in Douglass, 1982: 6). On the other hand, literary critic George Kent “has noted that Puritan confessional narratives and Methodist conversion narratives had an obvious influence on slave narratives, shaping their pious tone as well as the profiles of their moral reflections” (cited in Douglass 1982, 5).

While literary critic Henry Louis Gates, Jr. believes that “slave narrators created what he calls a ‘counter-genre,’ an intermediate form that participates in elements of ‘the sentimental novel and, above all, the specifically American transmutation of the European picaresque” (Gates, 1978: 21). Examples of this are the publication of Harriet Beecher Stowe’s popular work, *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*¹ (1852), and *Solomon Northup’s Twelve Years a Slave* (1789). Despite the success of these works, there was much censorship, and books and pamphlets barely circulated in the Deep South (Carolina, Alabama, Georgia, and Mississippi), and there was still much ignorance and illiteracy.²

Indeed, the influence of missionaries and religious “currents” played an extremely important role in the reading of the Bible, the sermon, and other rituals that were adapted and reconfigured to become part of the religious ritual practice of African American communities in the United States up to the present day. An important figure in this case would be the abolitionist and suffragist Harriet Tubman (Harriet Jacobs after marriage), registered at birth as Araminta Ross, who fought for the freedom of enslaved African Americans in the United States. In her lifetime, she published an autobiography entitled *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*³ (1861) under

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- 1 “Watch *12 Years a Slave* (2013). Directed by Steve McQueen and starring Chiwetel Ejiofor as Solomon Northup. The screenplay, written by John Ridley, is an adaptation of Solomon Northup’s autobiography, ‘Twelve Years a Slave.’ Northup was a free African American born in New York state who was kidnapped in Washington D.C. in 1841, sold into slavery, and later freed in 1853 after working on Louisiana plantations for 12 years. ‘12 Years a Slave’ is McQueen’s third feature film and won three Academy Awards at the 86th Academy Awards (2013) for Best Picture, Best Supporting Actress (Lupita Nyong’o), and Best Adapted Screenplay, as well as the Golden Globe for Best Motion Picture - Drama and the BAFTA Award, among others. The film was shot in New Orleans from June 27 to August 13, 2012, with a budget of \$20 million, at four historic plantations: Felicity, Magnolia, Bocage, and Destrehan. Of the four, Magnolia is the closest to the actual plantation where Northup worked. African American history and culture scholar Henry Louis Gates Jr. served as a consultant on the film, and researcher David Fiske, co-author of ‘Solomon Northup: The Complete Story of the Author of Twelve Years a Slave,’ provided material used for the film’s marketing. However, news and magazine articles from the time of the film’s release described a scholar alleging some license that Northup may have taken with his book, and the liberties that McQueen definitely took with Northup’s original. The film premiered at the Telluride Film Festival on August 30, 2013, and has received generally positive reviews from critics. It was released in U.S. theaters on October 18, 2013, and in the UK on January 10, 2014. The release of this film - along with other films about the life and work of Martin Luther King - coincided with the 150th anniversary of the abolition of slavery (1863) and the arrival of Barack Obama as President of the United States. See Fiske, David, Brown, Clifford W. Jr. & Seligman, Rachel (2013). ‘Solomon Northup: The Complete Story of the Author of Twelve Years a Slave.’ ABC-CLIO, 225 pp.”
 - 2 See “Documenting the American South: Primary Resources for the Study of Southern History, Literature and Culture”. Retrieved from <https://docsouth.unc.edu/>
 - 3 See “Harriet” (2019). American biographical film about abolitionist Harriet Tubman. Directed by Kasi Lemmons, who co-wrote the screenplay with Gregory Allen Howard, and starring Cynthia Erivo as Tubman, with Leslie Odom Jr., Joe Alwyn, and Janelle Monáe in supporting roles. A biopic about Harriet Tubman had been in development for years, with several actresses, including Viola Davis, rumored to star. Erivo was cast in February 2017, and much of the cast and crew joined the following year. Filming took place in Virginia from October to December 2018. “Harriet” premiered at the Toronto International Film Festival on September 10, 2019, and was released in theaters in the United States on November 1,

the pseudonym Linda Brent.⁴ In this work, she describes meeting an elderly Black man who was longing to learn to read so he could better serve God by reading the Bible. Despite the fact that it was against the law for slaves to be taught to read, Tubman agreed to teach him, and the man promised to bring her good fruit as payment. After escaping slavery and settling in the North, Tubman conducted thirteen rescue missions and freed around 300 slaves, using a network of abolitionists known as the “Underground Railroad.”⁵ She also aided John Brown after his raid on Harpers Ferry and fought for suffrage for women after the Civil War. Tubman’s former home was abandoned in 1920 but was later restored by the African Methodist Episcopal Zion Church and turned into a museum and center for education. In a passage from her work, the African American abolitionist writer expresses her desire to awaken Northern women to the plight of the two million Southern women still in captivity, stating that only through experience can someone realize the depth, darkness, and vileness of slavery.

2019, by Focus Features. It received generally favorable reviews from critics, who praised Erivo’s performance and found the film sincere but formulaic. For her performance in the film, Erivo received nominations at the Academy Awards, Golden Globes, and Screen Actors Guild, as well as an Oscar nomination for Best Original Song (“Stand Up”). See “Stand Up”. Official Music Video (Soundtrack) Performed by Cynthia Erivo - HARRIET -. Available at <https://youtu.be/sn19xvfoXvk>

4 See Yellin, Jean Fagan (2004). *Harriet Jacobs: A Life*. Cambridge, Massachusetts: Basic Civitas Books.

5 The Underground Railroad (also known as the Clandestine Railroad) was a clandestine network organized in the 19th century in the United States and Canada to help African American slaves escape from plantations in the southern United States to free states in the north or to Canada. Although it is called a “network,” there was no central organization or guide; they knew the immediate resources available and gave them to the fugitive, sometimes accompanying them to another safe house. There was a whole industry of men searching for runaway slaves, so a place where these men did not suspect or search for them was very valuable. John Brown built a secret room in his tannery factory, although he was not the only one. The name “Underground Railroad” comes from the fact that its members used railroad terms metaphorically to refer to their activities. For example, conductors or engineers were the ones who helped runaway slaves in the slave states of the South. They provided disguises, maps, instructions on where to stay, and sometimes accompanied them during the journey. They were, therefore, very bold activists because helping runaway slaves was punishable by death at that time. Other activists established stations along the railroad, that is, places like private homes where runaways arrived and could hide, eat, rest, receive medical assistance, and information about the next stage of the journey. For example, the Quaker couple Levi and Catherine Coffin, who lived in Newport, Indiana, were stationmasters for more than twenty years, and during this time, around 2,000 runaway slaves passed through their home (the station). The runaway slaves were the passengers. The escape routes were called tracks. The headquarters was the Central Station, and the northern states or Canada were the destination. Members of the Underground Railroad operated clandestinely and usually only knew each other by their pseudonyms, to avoid compromising their security. They also made passengers swear to keep the secret. The Underground Railroad sought its collaborators within the abolitionist movement, of which it was a part, and thus extended its activities always outside the law. Perhaps the most famous and popular character in the history of the Underground Railroad was Harriet Tubman, whom they called “the Moses of the slaves,” and who was a conductor who was born a slave in Maryland and escaped in 1848. Once she reached the North and achieved her freedom, she joined the Underground Railroad and in the following years returned to the South up to 19 times to help hundreds of slaves escape. Slaveholders even offered a reward for capturing her alive or dead, but she continued her work. The Underground Railroad operated until slavery was definitively abolished after the Civil War (1861-1865). People who had collaborated with the Underground Railroad played an important role in the war due to the instruction they received and their knowledge of the terrain. Throughout its existence, the Underground Railroad succeeded in freeing thousands of slaves and also influenced public opinion to gain supporters of the abolitionist cause. See Blasco Lucía “The Underground Railroad: The True Story of the Clandestine Network that Allowed Thousands to Escape from Slavery in the United States” in *BBC News Mundo*, published on September 17, 2021. See Lindley, Robin (2015). *Gateway to Freedom. The Hidden History of the Underground Railroad*. W. W. Norton & Company, 352 pp. See Foner, Eric. “Slavery and the Underground Railroad: An Interview with Robin Lindley.” In *Hypotheses*. CLIONAUTA: History Blog. Retrieved from <http://historynewsnetwork.org/article/158362> and/or <https://www.bbc.com/mundo/noticias-57835207>

Gerardo Gurza believes that there were always voices of prominent figures who expressed progressive ideas in the American colonies, including abolitionists or anti-slavery advocates. He cites the example of Virginia, where a group of enlightened planters receptive to new European currents of thought found critiques of slavery convincing as an obstacle to economic and social progress. Figures such as George Washington, Thomas Jefferson, and James Madison, who were among the main protagonists of the revolutionary process and the creation of the new government, believed they were witnessing the dawn of a new era of human progress in which a barbaric and backward institution like slavery should not have a place. Enlightened Virginians like St. George Tucker, Ferdinando Fairfax and Jefferson himself dedicated considerable efforts to conceive a viable plan for the gradual emancipation of slaves, a plan of gradual application designed to cause the least possible economic and social disruption, and that could in that measure win the consensus of the majority of the owning class, of which they themselves were members (Gurza, 2016: 29).

The Reality after the Abolition of Slavery

The reality is that the abolition of slavery remained mostly in good intentions and few concrete and lasting actions in favor of it. The separation of families and the sale of slaves continued, as well as the “right of first night” and the rape of African-American women. In fact, “religious bodies eventually adjusted to the fact that family separations were to some extent inevitable [...] Churches opted to seek practical rules for what could be taken as valid reasons for ending unions and allowing second marriages” (Gurza, 2016: 128). This was what most scandalized and sought to be avoided by the North, who abolished slavery - to which mainly those in the South opposed.⁶ Revolts and rebellions on plantations became more common, one of which was led by the slave Nat Turner⁷ against plantation owners in Virginia. Edward Ball shares a testimony from a descendant of a slave-owning family in South Carolina who was the victim of actions taken by Turner.

Nat Turner, a slave from Virginia, led a rebellion with nineteen comrades in which almost sixty whites were killed. For white Southerners, *The Liberator* [an abolitionist newspaper] seemed to lead directly to Nat Turner. In reaction to the abolitionist press, Southern writers coined their own new genre, the pro-slavery essay (Ball, 2000: 242).

6 The “Mason-Dixon Line”. British scientists Charles Mason and Jeremiah Dixon were renowned scientists when they were commissioned to settle a land dispute in pre-revolutionary United States in 1763. Known in England as master surveyors and astronomers, for 80 years the Calvert family of Maryland and the Penns of Pennsylvania engaged in a bloody dispute over the boundary between the two colonies granted by the English crown. At the time, it was considered an innovative technical achievement, coming to symbolize the North-South border in the American Civil War, separating slave-free Pennsylvania from slave-holding Maryland. A north-south division between Maryland and Delaware of 133.5 kilometers and the better-known west-east division separating Pennsylvania and Maryland, covering 375 km and stretching from southern Philadelphia to what is now West Virginia. The Mason-Dixon Line is made up of almost 400 stones marked with the letters P, for Pennsylvania, and M, for Maryland. See Sally M. Walker (2014). *Boundaries: How the Mason-Dixon Line Settled a Family Feud and Divided a Nation*. Candlewick Press.

7 See William Styron (2008). *The Confessions of Nat Turner*. Barcelona: La Otra Orilla.

In this sense, Gurza states, "These plans, though well-intentioned, had very clear limitations: they did not want to harm interests to any greater degree, and all of them categorically rejected the possibility of cohabitation of the two races without slavery. Freedom could only be conceived if it came hand in hand with colonization of free blacks in a distant land" (2016: 29). In practice, not all works like those mentioned a few paragraphs earlier were taken seriously, as they lent themselves precisely to the ideological and economic interests of abolitionists. An example of this is that even in the early twentieth century, historiography in academia continued to be blatantly racist. It was around the mid-twentieth century that this view began to slowly change, though not without ideological influences, with some historians even comparing slavery to the extermination initiated by the Nazis and Auschwitz. "Paternalism" became a term that became common as part of this ideology that infantilized and victimized the black population, thus legitimizing the continuation in the imaginary of slavery and oppression against African Americans. Gurza maintains that:

Since the late eighteenth century, Thomas Jefferson had asserted that (love between slaves) seems to be more an anxious desire than that tender and delicate mixture of sensation and sentiment' that, according to him, characterized love between whites. Already in the nineteenth century, another Southern intellectual, in less elegant terms, claimed that black couples were united by 'very light bonds of concubinage,' and that their capacity for conjugal love had been greatly exaggerated. Another writer, in even more stark language, said with all conviction that 'the lack of family affection and insensitivity to ties of kinship' were inherent characteristics of the black race. These are only well-articulated manifestations of what was a fairly widespread racist opinion about the supposed promiscuity and licentious sexuality of blacks (2016: 124).

Remember that the "founding fathers" of the United States and many more presidents of this country were before and after the abolition of slavery, owners of slaves. At least twelve presidents of the country had slaves during their lives between the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, when the ownership of slaves was considered a common and unquestionable practice in the face of any possible conscientious objection among statesmen. To name a few, George Washington, Thomas Jefferson, James Madison, John Tyler, James Monroe, Martin Van Buren, William Henry Harrison, James K. Polk, Zachary Taylor, Andrew Johnson, and Ulysses S. Grant, as well as the most notorious for his infamy, the first Democratic President: Andrew Jackson. Soler, critical and timely, comments: "Regarding the US, one must ask oneself this question: were the founding fathers of this country responsible for slavery in America?" (2021: 27).

June 19th commemorates the arrival in 1865 of Union soldiers (from the North) in Galveston, Texas, to inform slaves that they were free from that moment on and that the civil war had ended. This event took place more than two years after President Abraham Lincoln signed the Emancipation Proclamation, which freed the slaves, although there were places like the state of Texas where the proclamation was barely enforced, since Union troops were practically nonexistent in that region to make it valid. Today, 47 states in the United States recognize June 19th as a holiday, although despite initiatives, Congress has never been able to expand and make it effective at the federal level. For Diego Cobo.

The Emancipation Proclamation, promoted by Lincoln, destroyed the legal system of slavery that had inflated the economy of the country and Europe with about six hundred thousand slaves, a number that multiplied to four million at the time of abolition. His strategy was particular: owners had realized that it was easier to force slaves to have children among themselves than to bring them from Africa (2018: 76-77).

After the abolition of slavery in the United States, the slave system began to converge towards social, economic, and political relationships - that is, deeply cultural - based on a kind of "racial capitalism" that has not been erased even in this decade of the 2020s: exclusive, discriminatory, biased in the application of the law and the most fundamental rights established in the Constitution, violent, among many other things. It is enough to remember only the wave of violence that erupted in the town of Ferguson,⁸ Missouri in 2015, which led then-African American President Barack Obama to affirm that racism was in the nation's DNA. Inequalities and inequities continue to be marked and blatant in favor of the white population and to the detriment of the African American population, not to mention other "minorities" such as the Hispanic population mainly, among others, who suffer no less than the target population treated in this essay.

Conclusions

This work stops short of the beginning of the Civil War, offering only some general data on what would come next for the self-proclaimed "American" nation. It seems clear that it was precisely the lies, economic interests, and political and social exclusions generated by racism and discrimination around emancipation and the abolition of slavery that ignited the passions that led to the American Civil War of the mid-19th century between the abolitionist North (Unionists) and the anti-abolitionist South (Confederates).

Among the objectives of this document was to make it clear to the reader that it was never kindness, humanism, or virtuous philanthropy that motivated the "abolitionists" of the North to fight for the termination of the enslavement regime suffered by African Americans, but rather selfish economic interests, in the first place; and political interests, in the second place. Lincoln's true concern was to save the "Union"; therefore, at the end of the war, he found a deeply divided country between Unionists and Secessionists, going so far as to declare that "The primary objective of the government in this struggle is to save the Union and not to support or fight against slavery. If I can save the nation without freeing a single slave, I will do so; if I can do it by freeing all, I will do so as well, and if I can do it by freeing some and not others, I will do so" (quoted in Cepero Bonilla, 1977: 116). We begin with Condorcet and conclude by quoting him. He states in the epilogue to his work, to which we alluded, that "slavery is not only an absurdity that must be stigmatized, but an evil that can be eradicated" (Condorcet, 2017:

8 See Robin D. G. Kelley. "Class & Inequality, Race. Forum: Black Study, Black Struggle. The university is not an engine of social transformation. Activism is". Published in the Boston Review on March 1, 2016. Retrieved from https://www.bostonreview.net/forum/robin-kelley-black-struggle-campus-protest/?utm_source=Boston+Review+Email+Subscribers&utm_campaign=d0c48f1b4c-roundup_february_23&utm_medium=email&utm_term=0_2cb428c5ad-d0c48f1b4c-41236578&mc_cid=d0c48f1b4c&mc_eid=1b5679a5b8

82). This prediction, laden with good intentions by the enlightened French intellectual, has not found its rightful place in American society to date, not to mention the place it occupies in other social constructs and realities.

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