

Olaudah Equiano

Slave narratives aimed from the beginning to counter that sense of “otherness” with which European and American racism tried to brand people of African descent. The first slave narrative to garner international attention was *The Interesting Narrative of the Life of Olaudah Equiano, or Gustavus Vassa, the African*, published in London in two volumes in 1789. This book combined a story of African captivity and Christian conversion with a detailed description of the brutalities of the Middle Passage and slavery in the West Indies. Equiano also recounted his successful assimilation into British life and his achievement of social respect and economic independence as a cosmopolitan man of the world, in particular, the burgeoning Atlantic world, where far-flung peoples and cultures were coming into unprecedented and often violent contact during Equiano’s lifetime. Equiano’s was the first of many success stories authored by persons of African descent who, though subjected to enslavement, attained their freedom and went on to rise, socially and economically, to respectable, even exemplary, status. These stories gave the lie to those who claimed that slavery was the most fitting and indeed the highest status that the darker “races” could ever hope to reach in Western civilization.

With the rise of a vigorous and uncompromising antislavery movement in the early nineteenth century in the U.S. came a heightened demand for slave narratives that would highlight the harsh realities of American slavery itself. American abolitionists became convinced that the eye-witness testimony of former slaves against slavery would touch the hearts and change the minds of many in the northern population of the United States who were either ignorant of or indifferent to the plight of African Americans in the South. The publication of *The Confessions of Nat Turner* in 1831, published by a white slaveholder as Turner’s account of his “insurrection” in August of that year, galvanized the fledgling radical abolitionists into action while traumatizing the slaveholding South into great repression of black people, enslaved and free.