# Introduction

## Toward a Reading of the Catholic Margin in Contemporary Narratives of Slavery

IN 1992, PAUL GILES PUBLISHED his broad and ambitious account of Roman Catholicism "as a residual cultural determinant" within American literature from the early part of the nineteenth century to the present (1). Focusing on writers who grew up Catholic or were exposed to Catholic practices as children, he argues that even for nonbelievers and apostates, the rituals they performed and the doctrines they studied in their youth can affect aesthetic production "in some circuitous or unconscious fashion long after the forces of rationality have deconstructed and rejected" such irrational precepts (2). The range of Giles's analysis is extensive, and he examines the work of authors from a variety of socioeconomic and ethnic contexts as well as from nearly two centuries of U.S. history. Yet at the end of the book he acknowledges that there remains at least one key aspect of contemporary Catholic culture that his inquiry barely touches upon: he calls in his conclusion for a fuller consideration of how artists who have been historically disenfranchised by racial segregation within the church—and African Americans specifically—deploy discourses of Catholicism in their fiction. Fewer than four pages of his 531-page book are devoted to nonwhite authors, and so by way of atoning for this imbalance, Giles invites further consideration of a literature that reflects the "distinctly . . . oppositional cultural perspective" through which African American writers "filter" Catholic "themes" (518).

Now, almost a quarter century after Giles's *American Catholic Arts and Fictions* highlighted the dearth of scholarship on Catholicism in African American literature, we find ourselves still awaiting the start of the con-

versation. While a handful of articles and book chapters have addressed the religious content of texts by individuals with clear ties to Catholic culture, such as Alice Dunbar-Nelson, whose Creole heritage features prominently in her fiction, and Claude McKay, who wrote extensively about converting to Catholicism, no major study of the topic has yet been undertaken.[1] My project thus inaugurates what I hope will become a far-reaching, multi-directional effort among critics to identify and contextualize how the African American literary tradition engages Catholic ideology, theology, and social practices. For when we look closely, Catholicism appears at the margins of a significant number of significant works throughout the canon of African American literature—including those written by authors who were never practicing Catholics. From some of the earliest published texts in the tradition (fugitive slave narratives by Frederick Douglass and Harriet Jacobs, for example)[2] to some of the most recent (plays such as *The Death of the Last Black Man in the Whole Entire World* by Suzan-Lori Parks),[3] Catholicism operates in various ways, all of which warrant extended reflection. Indeed, given the conspicuous lack of scholarly attention to this Catholic margin and its implications, an examination of the subject in virtually any historical period or generic categorization would contribute materially to a more complete portrait of African American literary history.

This book focuses on contemporary narratives of slavery in particular because the genre developed at a time when there was growing interest in how religion and religious discourses determine our collective "memory" of the slave experience in the United States. Contemporary narratives of slavery—also called neo-slave narratives[4]—first emerged in the late 1960s and 1970s, during the height of national conversations about the way we remember that "peculiar institution," conversations that defined the legacy of racial oppression that persisted well past Emancipation and persists still.[5] In the wake of the civil rights and Black Power movements, academics from newly established Black Studies programs across the nation were advocating for a revision of the traditional historiography of slavery. Their calls were echoed by African American artists and writers, many of them affiliated with the Black Arts Movement whose founder, Amiri Baraka, made explicit his aesthetic compulsion to expose the lies that sustained white America's view of the past. As Ashraf Rushdy has contended, chief among those lies was the suggestion, prominent in white-authored texts

like William Styron's 1967 novel *The Confessions of Nat Turner*, that slaves possessed neither the knowledge nor the intellectual capacity to successfully resist the conditions of their enslavement—that they were, in effect, largely unthinking victims of the abuses perpetrated against them. In part to dispel these erroneous claims, historians and other academics invested in revising the historical record aimed to demonstrate the extraordinary lengths to which slaves often went to challenge the ideology of the system that made them chattel.

With regard to religion specifically, important work by Eugene Genovese, Lawrence Levine, and Albert Raboteau revealed how slaves manipulated the fundamentalist Protestant ideals imposed on them by southern slave owners seeking to cultivate an atmosphere of obedience. Their scholarship charted multiple courses of resistance, making the case that even the most apparently devout—and obedient—Christians were subtly defying their masters' power by using church meetings and religious gatherings for their own (sometimes revolutionary) purposes. Along similar lines, literary scholars began during this period to consider the canny ways that slave autobiographers negotiated Christianity in their writing, showing how they appealed to the abolitionist sympathies of an evangelical readership in the North by condemning the "ungodly" behavior of white Protestants in the South. But while this criticism brought awareness to the strategic use of religion in autobiographies by fugitive slave authors and helped to establish their autobiographies as "legitimate" works of literature, it also confirmed the tenuousness of their theological positions. In other words: by emphasizing the thoughtfulness and purpose with which the antebellum autobiographers wrote about Christian theology, studies such as John Blassingame's *The Slave Community* simultaneously drew attention to the religious conventions they were forced to uphold in the quest to gain northern sympathizers. Collectively, then, these studies made clear how much the political strategy of the fugitive slave authors depended on their ability to market themselves as spiritually saved and God-fearing Christians, whom white evangelicals in the North would deem "worthy" of liberation.

As a result of this burgeoning field of scholarship, which outlined both the advantages and the limitations of religious discourses of resistance for slaves, there was intense scrutiny in the post-civil-rights period on the way that antebellum narratives of slavery were shaped by Christianity—

and specifically on what the autobiographers had to withhold from their testimonies for fear of offending their readers or otherwise jeopardizing the abolitionist cause. Thus, at almost the same moment when academics were establishing the historical legitimacy and literary value of these first-person accounts of enslavement, new questions surfaced about the silences and obfuscations that pervade them.[6] If fugitive slave authors knew their political aims were contingent upon "proof" of Christian salvation, then what might they have chosen to leave out or to forget about their past? How could they possibly be expected to communicate the full truth of their experience to an audience looking for any reason to condemn them? The frustration implicit in entertaining such questions is, of course, that no satisfactory answers can ever be given, since—as Toni Morrison reminds us in her 1987 essay "The Site of Memory"—it would be impossible to separate the texts from the milieu in which they were written. According to Morrison, "whatever the level of eloquence" of a slave's autobiography, "popular taste" determined its style and its content, forcing the excision of any detail that might appear "sordid" or "excessive" (69). Morrison's analysis reflects the rising tide of skepticism that tempered early claims about the authenticity or truth-value of fugitive slave narratives from historians eager to legitimize their version of events. Rather than joining the chorus of those who celebrated unequivocally the autobiographers' capacity for accurately representing history from the slave's point of view, she sought to understand the social, political—and, yes, religious—forces that "dictated" what they wrote and the way they wrote it.

While skepticism of the kind that Morrison expresses might be thought to lessen interest in the form, what most critics argue is that it actually had the exact opposite effect: that the explosion of novels about slavery in the second half of the twentieth century was driven, not dampened, by studies exposing how dramatically the fugitive slave narratives were influenced by the values of their white readership. To put this in other terms: the criticism tends to correlate the genre's emergence in the decades following the movements for racial equality in the United States with a widespread effort of imagination on the part of contemporary African American authors to "fill the gaps" in the historical record of slavery—gaps left by antebellum autobiographers who had no choice but to relate their memories according to discursive conventions that would appeal to a white, evangelical audience in the North. And, in many respects, the correlation these critics

are making is based on the same premise that Morrison herself used to describe her "job" as a writer working in a "very different" historical context, "more than a hundred years after Emancipation." To her, "any person who is black, or who belongs to any marginalized category," has a responsibility to imaginatively recover that which the fugitive slaves could not remember, as a consequence of the "climate in which they wrote." Thus Morrison regards her own fiction about slavery as a concerted attempt "to rip that veil aside" that was drawn over their autobiographies by a set of discourses they "were seldom invited to participate in . . . even when [they] were its topic" ("Site" 70).

As Madhu Dubey has demonstrated, the particular set of discourses that contemporary narratives of slavery sought to undermine were informed by "Enlightenment modernity" as well as the realist and rationalist imperatives that characterized writing produced "during an era when slaves were relegated to subhuman status because they were believed to be innately incapable of reason" (340). With that in mind, Dubey and other literary scholars working on the genre have stressed the range of techniques that authors deploy to confound the rationalizing impulse of antebellum texts, arguing that by disrupting realism in their narratives, they are effectively "reclaiming" those portions of the slave experience that were "suppressed by the modern legacy" and consequently excised from the traditional historiography of slavery ("Neo-Slave" 342).[7] The more unrealistic or supernatural aspects of the genre that proliferate especially in contemporary slave narratives written after 1970 have therefore been interpreted as a reaction against Enlightenment rationalism—and the values of the Protestant Reformation with which, in the United States as in Europe, the Age of Enlightenment was inexorably connected. Following Paul Gilroy's brilliant and hugely influential study *The Black Atlantic*, the vast majority of criticism on these novels links their radical breaks with realism to a "counterculture" of modernity that "defiantly reconstructs its own critical, intellectual, and moral genealogy" in terms categorically opposed to the Western model (37–38). This is how critics have explained, for example, the frequent appearance of alternative belief structures and non-Western religions in contemporary narratives of slavery: as a tool for destabilizing the religious strictures placed on the antebellum slave autobiographers by the evangelical Protestant audiences who constituted their primary readership.