

Dear Master:
An Exploration of Letters from American Slaves

Alejandra Dubcovsky

Mentor: Professor David Henkin, History Department

ABSTRACT

From slave narratives to a rich tradition of folklore, slaves left multiple and varied imprints of their lives and struggles in bondage. These slave-produced accounts have become necessary for representing the experience and impact of American slavery. While some forms of slave testimony have been collected and interpreted, others remain on the sidelines, referenced and acknowledged, but not widely analyzed. This paper examines a group of sources from this latter category of slave testimony, dissecting an unexplored venue for slave expression: letters written and dictated by American slaves.

“Dear Master,” these are the two simple words that mark the beginning of an intricate epistolary discourse between slaves and their masters in antebellum America, 1830-1864. Although some letters have been gathered and printed in collections, the vast majority of these sources remain unpublished and unexplored. This paper examines the slave letter collection housed in the Louis Round Wilson archive at the University of North Carolina Chapel Hill in an attempt to provide a critical overview for these complex and rich sources.

Analyzing four very different slave letters, the paper details some of the different ways slaves understood and negotiated slavery. The letters are divided into two categories: letters written by slaves and letters dictated by slaves; these letters span different the decades (from 1813-1864), locations, and experiences, yet in all their variety they comprise a unified genre.

This paper deconstructs the richness and complexity of a practice that enabled slaves to correspond with their enslavers. Delving into slave letters themselves, this paper not only explores the patterns and complexities of an overlooked insight into slavery, but also stresses the need for further research and consideration of this epistolary discourse. The paper embarks on a close reading of these slave correspondences with the hope to fuel further historical examination of these elided testimonies.

Slaves, Masters, Correspondence: An Absent Debate

Letters are by no means an unfamiliar group of sources to scholars of American slavery. Since the mid-1970s, historians have not only acknowledged the potential contributions of this form of slave testimony, but have also incorporated these sources into their discussions of bondage and slave-life. “Timeless in their revelations,” slave letters have been integrated into historical arguments through two distinct approaches.

In the first approach, slave letters are introduced into the historical analysis without consideration for the specificity of the epistolary practice as an address and interaction between slave and master. When

illustrating the repercussions of the slave trade on the slave family, Walter Johnson's book *Soul by Soul* relies on a slave letter. "The letter Eliza sent to her Maryland master trying to convince him to allow a reunion with her daughter," Johnson argues, was this "woman's effort to reinstitute, if only for a moment, her broken family."¹ Cited as an act of agency, Johnson introduces this heartrending correspondence as he would any other source, calling no attention to its epistolary structure. As another example of the slave trade's impact on slave life, Eliza's letter appears only in the backdrop of Johnson's broader argument—a small thread in an intricately woven work.

The second way slave letters have been introduced into historical works seems to be the antithesis of the first; in this latter approach, slave letters occupy a category entirely their own, regarded as unique sources that speak for themselves. The slave letter collections of Robert Starobin's *Blacks in Bondage, Letters of American Slaves* (1974), and John Blassingame's *Slave Testimony* (1977) are a perfect epitomized of this usage of slave letters. Their works are fascinating compilations of these sources, but they do not provide an analytical discussion from which to begin dissecting and understanding these sources. Similarly, Randall M. Miller's "*Dear Master*," *Letters of a Slave Family* (1978) gathered a collection of letters by a particular slave family in an attempt to conduct a unique analysis into one family's life. Although "*Dear Master*" provides an interesting way of examining this family, the book fails to contextualize these experiences, lacking an argument that resonates outside the microcosm of this family. The main contribution of these three compilations is the publication of the correspondences themselves, not their critical frameworks. Whether treating letters as ordinary or as a *sui generis*, historians have employed, but not explored slave letters.

Produced by slaves and crafted from within bondage, slave letters seem to exemplify the ideal source for the study of the slave experience; yet addressed to slave masters and dealing with issue tied to the master's world, these sources offer a convoluted access into the slaves' world. These letters account for the masters' authority and importance, as they situate the slave writers in a milieu of community and agency. Slave letters are self-complementary sources, revealing the perspectives of both slaves and masters. Although historians are predisposed to consider separate sources to quantify for the drastically different experiences of the enslaver and the enslaved, slave letters present a synthesis. Never a perfect intertwining of the slaves and masters' world, slave correspondence offers an imbalanced representation of an imbalanced relation.

Speaking to the Devil: Letters from Slaves to Masters

The majority of the slave letters that have been preserved are addressed to slave masters.² These letters were often written at the master's request, because he was away from the plantation and desired information about his crops and estate. James C. Johnston, a master who did not regularly reside in his plantation at Poplar Plaines, North Carolina, remained informed of the conditions of his plantation through his regular correspondence with his slave Peter.³ Although none of the Johnston's letters to Peter have been preserved, Peter acknowledges receiving his master's correspondence. "Master I recived your letter [and] was glad to hear from you," Peter writes on April 5, 1850 (Johnston Family Series).⁴ He continues his letter informing Johnston of the plantation's conditions: "The weather has been very disagreeable with us thus week I have got a long very slow planting as the ground has been too wet from Wednesday breakfast" (Johnston Family Series).⁵ Although his letter is mostly impersonal, centering on day-to-day reports, Peter also uses the space created by their correspondence to inform Mr. Johnston of his *personal* concerns and troubles.

In a letter from later that year, Peter complains about the white overseer, Mr. Sawyer:

Mr Sawyer are not like he was when you left he gives me some trouble with the hands and some with [M]anuel but we have not had any words no fuss among us only he is getting or trying to get them out of old order but please sir enjoy your self and not let this bear on your mind for I can get along very well until you come let it belong or short (Johnston Family Series).⁶

In this letter, Peter not only conveys his struggles with Mr. Sawyer, but also assures Mr. Johnston that he can control the situation. By stating “do *not* let this bear in your mind,” Peter is implicitly asking Mr. Johnston not to forget this incident (Johnston Family Series).⁷ By over emphasizing the insignificance of the event, Peter is indicating that this small “fuss,” as he calls it, is pertinent. Peter, as most slaves engaging in this epistolary discourse, employs a complex letter-writing strategy. On the surface, his letters present a very obliging message but if read carefully, they reveal a correspondence loaded with personal requests and information.

The level of personal expression, however, varies from letter to letter. In October 22, 1847, Delia, a slave from Kentucky, writes a pleading letter to her master; her personal concerns are her very motivation for engaging in epistolary discourse.

Master I take this liberty to ask you pleas to bye henry and let him com hom and live with me pleas... I did not no that Mr Miller had bought him in teel [until] the morning... when he [Henry] found that he was forced to leave me it was lik taking his life and I suppose he be com despat (Ballard Rice Paper).⁸

From its heartfelt opening line, “bye henry and let him com hom and live with me pleas,” this letter’s emotions are overwhelming. Yet aware that her audience is her master, someone who is profiting from the sale of her husband, Delia does not simply rely on emotions. Her appeal is carefully crafted.

The emotion and straightforwardness of Delia’s correspondence should not be confused with complete honesty. Delia, although pleading for her husband, never loses sight that her letter’s intended audience is her master. For example, when she has to explain why she had not pleaded for her husband before, she corroborates her excuse by incorporating an assertion from Captain T., a white man. By stating, “Capt Teaurgen promised me he wold not sell him out of the place,” she is adding evidence to her otherwise purely semimetal letter—aware that the Captain’s words will probably bear more validity than hers (Ballard Rice Paper).⁹

Although this letter shows the vulnerability of the slaves to the whims of the master, it also demonstrates their resilience within the institution. Delia, in this desperate moment of separation, not only writes an emotional plea, but also offers a logical solution. If Mr. Ballard Rice will not purchase Henry, she provides the names of potential buyers; “Miss C——-[illegible] has promsit me that she would ask you to bye him” (Ballard Rice Paper).¹⁰ Delia’s plea demonstrates that she understands the boundaries of slavery, but is not going to be silenced in her status.

In this epistolary communication, Delia and Mr. Ballard Rice begin to bargain for Henry.¹¹ In order to make this bargain, Delia constructs her correspondence as an appeal directed and structured for her master. She pleads, “you no how hard it is to leave your family when you no there.” Delia dares to make a connection between her husband, a slave just sold in the auction stand, and her master, the man who sold him. “*You no how hard it is to leave your family,*” Delia asserts, “I hope *you* will think for a moment how hard it is my housband” (Ballard Rice Paper).¹² By directly addressing Mr. Ballard Rice, “you,” and repeating the same phrase, “how hard it is,” Delia draws a link between master and slave. The distance separating Mr. Ballard Rice from his family, which will soon tear Delia from her husband, connects Mr. Ballard with his slave. Slave letters might focus on mundane reports of daily life, yet these sources, produced in the inhumanity of slavery, are a space in which the slave could addresses his enslaver.

Dictation was a common way through which the slaves engaged in epistolary practice. Many slaves dictated their correspondence, involving other participants in their communication.¹³

Mr. Pettigrew placed Moses and Henry, two illiterate slaves, in charge of his plantations and asked them to report regularly by dictating letters to their neighbor, Malichi J. White. The Pettigrew collection is atypical because both the slaves' letters and the master's responses have been preserved; there are over fifty letters from Moses, Henry, Malichi White, and Mr. Pettigrew. Although Mr. Pettigrew instructs his slaves "to write freely to me respecting the plantation," Moses and Henry could not write *freely*; they needed their amanuensis: Mr. White (Pettigrew Family Papers).¹⁴ Since these letters are dictated and produced under such close scrutiny, it would be easy to assume that the slave's voice disappears or is silenced by the other parties' involvement in the letter. But the slave voice is still present.

Moses and Henry dictated their separate reports to the same person. Although it is Mr. White who transcribes both of these dictations, the letters of Moses and Henry possess certain distinctions. For example, Henry's letters end usually with the phrase, "your servant Henry," while Moses' letters conclude with, "your servant Moses and your friend" (Pettigrew Family Papers).¹⁵ These letters also possess different opening lines. While Henry's correspondence always begins with the phrase, "my love to master an to master Johnston," Moses' epistolary messages do not have a recurrent opening line. These minor differences between Henry and Moses' dictations show that Mr. White not only noted, but also included personal subtleties in these letters.

But can the slave's voice really be distinguished? John Blassingame, one of the few historians to have analyzed slave letters, argued that it could not; "only those [letters] written by blacks to their relatives can be accepted as literally true" (Blassingame 1977).¹⁶ However, Blassingame's guidelines deem unreliable the majority of slave letters that have been preserved. Thus, instead of disregarding the vast majority of these sources, this paper accepts the possibility that perhaps not all parts of all the letters are "literally true," finding it more relevant to analyze what these letters *do* offer: carefully constructed messages. Even if these letters are not "literally true," the original questions still remain: how could slaves communicate with their masters? How could someone in the chains of bondage correspond with their oppressors? A letter dictated by Charles White provides an interesting response.

Charles was a hired-out-slave, who writes to his master, Mr. Brown, by the hand of Mr. Peyton, the man employing him. Charles's letter, dictated and addressed to his master, still manages to unveil his aspirations and desires.

Dear Master, The time for which you hired me to Mr. Peyton has ready expired and I am at a loss to know what I am to do the enduring year... I should like to know your pleasure that I may conform to it... if you would authorize me to open a shop in this county and carry it on as Arthur has done...If you should accommodate me in this regard it will be repay that you sho- authorize some one to act as my master in this county to preven difficulties arising from the —— of the Laws (Hamilton Papers).¹⁷

While in the first portion of the letter, Charles asks to "know [his master's] pleasure that [he] may conform to it," in the latter half Charles expressed his true desires to become a self-hired blacksmith.

Charles opens his letter by asking his master for guidance, showing himself "at a loss to know what I am to do." By asking for instructions, Charles affirms his need for his master. But after he establishes this humble tone, Charles ventures forth and offers a suggestion, "you [c] ould authorize me to open a shop." Although this is a daring request, Charles preserves the obliging tone he had established at the beginning of the letter. Charles's language, "if you would authorize," assures his master that he will remain an obedient servant.

After making this bold suggestion, Charles adopts an overtly humble and master-obliging tone, evident by the constant repetition of the conditional "if," which emphasizes that this whole project could only be carried out *if* Mr. Brown agrees. Although the letter seems very responsive to Mr. Brown's

authority, Charles is using his master's previous decisions (which allowed another slave to open a shop) to achieve his personal "wish" to become a blacksmith. Charles presents a carefully crafted correspondence, which embeds his personal desire to become a blacksmith in a very obliging message.

The final section of the letter varies from the beginning portion. Although it shares its humble tone, Charles is not asking for guidance; he is not "at a loss to know what I am to do." He only needs his master "to preven difficulties arising from the —— of the Laws." This simple phrase shows that Charles is aware of both the structure of the laws, but also the ways in which to challenge them. Charles requires Mr. Brown's help only to accomplish his own, personal ambitions. The letters presents a smooth transition, which starts by asking the masters for instructions, and concludes by instructing the master.

In a complex letter, Charles addresses his master as a dutiful slave, dictates to his current employer as an obedient worker, yet still portrays himself as a self-motivated individual. Although one cannot determine which words belong to Charles and which ones to Mr. Peyton, this correspondence shows that someone in bondage could still inform, ask, and even try to persuade his oppressor.

Conclusion

In both the popular imagination and in historical analysis, letters have been described as particular sources that possess a deeper and more personal truth than other forms of testimony. Randall Miller, one of the few historians to have conducted the most extensive works on slave letters, argued "these documents do not have the limitations of the narratives and interviews former slaves. Third parties do not intrude to corrupt the language and structure of the letters... [The letters] worth rests in their casual, almost accidental nature. They are not polemics... they are, rather, the reflections of people's day-to-day concerns."¹⁸ Even John Blassingame and Robert Starobin have lauded the *peculiar* nature of these sources "that reveals the daily life and inner thoughts of bondsmen."¹⁹

As this paper argued, slave letters are not transparent expressions of the inner thoughts of bondsmen; composed in slavery and addressed to slaveholders, these epistolary testimonies are struggles for autonomy and freedom written in the vocabulary of slavery. Considering these letters as nothing but the true expression of a slave soul perpetuates a misconception, strips these sources of their complexity, and transforms the slave who produced these epistles into one-dimensional beings.

Slave letters are an epistolary dialogue that provides insight into how slaves communicated with their masters and negotiated their lives and roles in bondage. Entirely conscious of the audience of his letter, the slave had to be wary about how to communicate, producing a letter that encompassed both what the master expected and wanted to receive, yet also expressed the slave's own views. Far from being neutral documents, these letters are composed of many layers.

While not an exhaustive examination of slave letters, this paper analyzed a group of sources that historians had previously overlooked and vastly oversimplified. This paper presented four examples of the epistolary conversation between oppressors and oppressed not only to show the patterns, intricacies, and complexities of the slave letters, but also to call for further investigation of these neglected, yet valuable sources for the study of slavery. Slave letters evince the struggles and tensions of communicating slaves, whose involvement in this epistolary practice reveals more than the slaves' complex relations with their masters; these letters are a slave's expression— a struggling and conscious voice.

NOTES

1. Except by W.E.B DuBois, but his books *Black Reconstruction* (1935) was largely ignored.
2. U.B. Phillips concludes that slavery is a school that educated the inferior children.
3. Kenneth M. Stampp. *The Peculiar Institution, Slavery in the Ante-Bellum South*. New York: Vintage Books, 1956. 88.
4. There is a third compilation by Randall M. Miller, who gathered a collection of letters by a particular slave family. Although "*Dear Master, Letters of a Slave Family* (1978) provides an interesting way of analyzing this family, the book fails to contextualize these experiences, lacking an argument that resonates outside the microcosm of this family.
5. Letters between or to slaves are more rare, for it was harder for the slaves to preserve them.
6. Although the letters do not discuss why Mr. Johnston was constantly away, there are indications that he suffered from health conditions, which required him to be in a different climate.
7. Peter to Master James C Johnston, Hayes Collection, April 5 1850, Johnston Family Series (folder 533). Southern Historical Collection Louis Round Wilson Library.
8. Ibid.
9. From Peter to Master James C Johnston. July 28th 1850, Johnston Family Series (folder 537). All the letters have been quoted with their original spelling and grammar.
10. Ibid, emphasis mine
11. From Delia to Master (Ballard), October 22 1847, Ballard Rice, Series 1.3 (folder 217), Southern Historical Collection Louis Round Wilson Library.
12. Ibid.
13. Ibid.
14. Johnson, Walter. *Soul by Soul* (Cambridge, 1999) presents a masterful analysis of the bargaining between slave, buyer and seller at the auction stand. The idea comes from the chapter about slaves.
15. From Delia to Master (Ballard), October 22 1847, Ballard, Rice, Series 1.3 (folder 217), emphasis mine.
16. From Master Pettigrew to Moses, August 30 1856. The Pettigrew Family. Series 1 (folder 194). Southern Historical Collection Louis Round Wilson Library.
17. From Moses to Master Pettigrew, December 12 1857 (folder 205). and From Moses and Henry to Master Pettigrew, October 19 1857 (folder 205).
18. Blassingame, John. 1977. *Slave Testimony: Two Centuries of Letters, Speeches, Interviews, and Autobiographies*. Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 4.

19. Charles White by the hand of Mr. Peyton to Col. Hamilton Brown, December 20 1832, Hamilton. Sub-series 2.1.2 (folder 53). Southern Historical Collection Louis Round Wilson Library