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To Narrate and Denounce: Frederick Douglass and the Politics of Personal Narrative

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Abstract

What political problem can autobiography solve? This article examines the politics of Frederick Douglass's antebellum personal narratives: his 1845 slave narrative, the *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, an American Slave*, and his 1855 autobiography, *My Bondage and My Freedom*, written at the opposite ends of Douglass's transition from the abolitionist politics of William Lloyd Garrison and Wendell Phillips to Douglass's defense of political action and the Constitution as anti-slavery. Placing the two texts alongside Douglass's distinction "to narrate wrongs" and "denouncing them," I argue that Douglass writes *My Bondage and My Freedom* as a mode of *denunciation*: an autobiographical critique of injustice that balances analysis of collective oppression with advocacy for communal emancipation. Whereas to narrate wrongs encouraged readers to judge Douglass's story alongside popular criteria of justice, to denounce wrongs is to implicate readers within the structures that create antebellum subjects on and off the plantation, by revealing the coercions and conditionings of society that make not simply slaves but slaveowners, sympathizers, and abolitionists. This article claims that autobiography is a distinct genre of political theory, one that challenges present relations between the individual and the collective by representing not simply its author but an expanded view of "the people."

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“Tell your story, Frederick,” would whisper my then revered friend, William Lloyd Garrison, as I stepped upon the platform. I could not always obey, for I was now reading and thinking. New views of the subject were presented to my mind. It did not entirely satisfy me to narrate wrongs; I felt like denouncing them.

Frederick Douglass, *My Bondage and My Freedom*¹

What political problem can autobiography solve? Four years after escaping slavery in Maryland, Frederick Douglass wrote the 1845 *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, an American Slave* in the genre of slave narrative, with the help of William Lloyd Garrison and Wendell Phillips. Over the next decade, it would sell thirty thousand copies in twenty-one editions, translated and sold in America and Europe.² One of these copies Douglass sent to his legal owner, challenging Thomas Auld to refute its representation of slavery; Auld defended himself in a southern newspaper.³ By the time Douglass wrote Auld another letter in 1848 (pledging “to make use of you as a weapon with which to assail the system of slavery”), Douglass had begun drifting from Garrison and Phillips.⁴ Their use of moral suasion and calls for disunion clashed with Douglass’s strengthening defense of political action and the U.S. Constitution as anti-slavery.⁵ In the period before 1855, the Compromise of 1850 and the Kansas-Nebraska Act would polarize national conversation, and Douglass would find new interlocutors in Gerrit Smith, James McCune Smith, Martin Delany, and others.⁶ This was a period in which Douglass vacillated between “hope and gloom,” David Blight notes, between his “American jubilee” and pessimism over national compromises and abolitionists’ lingering racism.⁷ Rather than abandon southern slaves and absolve northern citizens, Douglass wanted to refound the nation. To this effort, Douglass wrote his 1855 autobiography, *My Bondage and My Freedom*, which would soon sell twenty thousand copies there and abroad.⁸ Although *Bondage* is nearly triple the length of *Narrative*, little more than a tenth of the book recalls events past the end of the 1845 text. Compare this to Douglass’s third personal narrative, *Life and Times* of 1881 and 1892, a text twice the length of *Bondage* yet more than half dedicated to Douglass’s life after 1855.⁹ This second book did not simply capture more, but a different Douglass. Garrison disliked this new self-made man: he censured a positive review of the book, to which Douglass asked that Garrison point to “the offensive portions” of the book, such that readers “may read and judge for themselves.”¹⁰ Garrison did not respond.

Scholars often look to Douglass's narratives to capture what W.E.B. Du Bois called Douglass's "self-assertion"; political theory looks to what Eric Sundquist describes as the ex-slave's embodiment of non-dominated independence, at a time of uncertainty for the Revolution's legacy.¹¹ Recent political theory monographs on Douglass draw on his personal narratives to supplement letters or speeches with biography.¹² Other theorists treat Douglass's overcoming of the slavebreaker Edward Covey (a scene featured in all three narratives) as a model for self-authorization, as in Herbert Marcuse's letter to Angela Davis or recent studies of honor and dignity.¹³ Despite how frequently these personal narratives appear in scholarship on Douglass, no political theorist has asked what it might mean for either to be more than a story of self-making but a form of dissent, a response to the authorities that ground slavery or early abolitionist politics. This is true not only of work on Douglass but of political theory's general treatment of autobiography. Although scholars have read political theory through the novel, the jeremiad, and the pamphlet (among other genres), few political theory approaches to autobiography exist.¹⁴ Although scholars such as Robert Gooding-Williams have compellingly argued for the "declarations of independence" in *My Bondage and My Freedom*, what if we read each narrative as its own declaration?¹⁵

This article considers the political relevance of Douglass's personal narratives by drawing on his distinction "to narrate wrongs" and "denouncing them." Like scholars before, I read Douglass's first text as slave narrative, his second as autobiography.¹⁶ I argue that Douglass writes *My Bondage and My Freedom* as a mode of *denunciation*: an autobiographical critique of injustice that balances analysis of collective oppression with advocacy for communal emancipation. Although Douglass's first narrative recounts his enslavement and escape, abolitionist publication of slave narrative and "slavery on trial" rhetoric framed *Narrative* within a racial hierarchy of black testimony and white advocacy. *Narrative* critiqued slavery but not the racism that underwrote both the peculiar institution and abolitionists' lingering prejudice. Whereas to narrate wrongs encouraged readers to judge Douglass's story alongside popular criteria of justice, to denounce wrongs in *My Bondage and My Freedom* is to implicate readers within the structures that create antebellum subjects on and off the plantation, by revealing the coercions and conditionings of society that make not simply slaves but slaveowners, sympathizers, and abolitionists. Thus Douglass's self-making in *Bondage* fits his developing politics, one that rejected moral suasion or disunion and that looked to expansive conceptions of "the people," such as those marshalled in response to *Dred Scott v. Sandford* or Independence Day celebrations. If slavery were—as Orlando Patterson would say—Douglass's social death, his autobiography would be his and the people's rebirth.¹⁷

To lay out the politics of Douglass's narratives, it may be useful to place denunciation between what Melvin Rogers has recently distinguished as the "descriptive" and "aspirational" invocations of "the people," the former an account of the individuals that a constitution or institutions specifically represent, and the latter an emancipatory claim to a future, unbounded constituency.¹⁸ This highlights two sides of denunciation captured in the title *My Bondage and My Freedom*: Douglass provides both a systemic analysis of antebellum peoplehood and a series of practices that produce a new self and people. Denunciation answers Rogers's "How do you move the people so that they will embrace an expanded view of themselves?"¹⁹ Denunciation, through autobiography, hovers on a line between what the people were and who they can be. This may seem counterintuitive, given the genre's focus not on a people who will be but an individual who was. But Douglass's multiple narratives insist that the self-evident "I" of published experience is not a given. In the same way that Jason Frank emphasizes the self-evidence of the Declaration or the Preamble's "We" as a place of contested postrevolutionary representations, so too is personal narrative at the intersection of political, historical, and economic expressions of the people.²⁰ For Douglass, these contestations didn't only result in a "constituent moment," but a new autobiographical declaration of the author and the people.

Of course, denunciation is but one of many ways through which political thinkers have framed autobiography, a genre that can provide exemplary or representative life stories, ethical ways of living, records of struggle, and so on. The broader claim beyond this article is that autobiography is a distinct form of political theory: in Douglass's case, distinct from slave narrative. Although scholars did not consider autobiography a genre any more literary than historical marginalia till the 1960s, those writing on autobiography in the past few decades have stressed the fluidity of the genre: it either covers everything, as in the deconstructionist Paul de Man's claim that all texts may include an "autobiographical moment," or it is potentially exclusionary, as in Julie Rak's assertion that the genre privileges Western, white male subjects.²¹ As Irving Howe wrote in his 1957 *Politics and the Novel*, my goal is not to rigidly categorize autobiography, rather to explore its distinct relevance for democratic politics over other genres.²² In this article, I treat autobiography as published personal narrative for which the author has authority over the representation of his experience, a genre that emerges roughly at the end of the eighteenth century. Autobiography is unique in requiring its author's full authority over the use of experience, unlike the confession, biography, or slave narrative. I use "personal narrative" more capaciously to speak of related genres. In the conclusion, I will suggest several family resemblances for what might distinguish the politics of autobiography in American history.

The benefits of reading autobiography as political theory are at least twofold. Although autobiography shares liberalism's inheritance of Enlightenment individualism, its reliance on the particular moves beyond American political thought's frequent impulse to situate figures like Douglass within trajectories of liberalism or republicanism. There's no question that Douglass promoted the language of natural rights, and many political theorists productively explore Douglass's political theory in this context.²³ But autobiography often recalls communal attachments or details foreign to a strictly liberal or republican tradition, putting figures like Douglass closer to those theorists who either complicate Douglass's place in liberalism or complicate liberalism through Douglass.²⁴ Douglass's autobiography privileges what Michael Hanchard describes as "the practice of reconfiguration," a mode of reading that does not simply rescue marginalized subjects but "aims to literally reconfigure the representation of the relationship between forms of black politics and a wider (national, regional, global) set of political, economic, and social realities."²⁵

Autobiography also responds to a bigger question in democratic theory, as to what democratic theory should give us. If democratic theory, following Sheldon Wolin's review of John Rawls's *Political Liberalism*, cannot be a "gift to the demos"—an abstract template for justice removed from the experience of injustice—then what should it look like?²⁶ Autobiography provides one suggestion, at least since Rousseau addressed his 1782 *Confessions* not to God but "to my kind."²⁷ In American history in particular, autobiography appeals not simply for Douglass but his inheritors Booker T. Washington and Du Bois, his antecedent Benjamin Franklin, and those with radical sympathies such as Henry Thoreau, Henry Adams, and Emma Goldman. Significant autobiographies appear at times when the relation between the individual and the state is in question, be that relation one of inheritance, imperialism, industrialization, education, immigration, or so on. These autobiographies portray not simply the author but the people not represented by political institutions or literary genres of the day. It is through autobiography, then, that many political thinkers have critiqued the polis not while standing above but within the demos.

The article lays out *Bondage* and denunciation in three sections: (1) I look at the relation between authority and experience in the slave narrative genre and Douglass's 1845 *Narrative*, both of which parallel Douglass's developing critiques of Garrison and others. (2) I read the preface to *Bondage* as reorienting the rhetorical strategy of "slavery on trial" from a claim of popular judgment to a renegotiation of the people. (3) In light of these two critiques, I portray *Bondage* as providing an account of slave-making that denounces others not as wrong-doers but as subjects of slavery as well.

Whereas to narrate wrongs is to try them against popular law or morality, to denounce wrongs implicates readers in the practice and product of self-examination that make up Douglass's autobiography. In addition to the emancipatory practices advocated within *My Bondage and My Freedom*, autobiography seeks to convert readers beyond the injustice that sponsored slavery and lingered even in abolitionist circles.

The Binding of Narrative

In the early nineteenth century, abolitionists published slave narratives as the public testimonies of slavery's survivors. Unlike autobiography, abolitionists and not authors authorized personal experience in the slave narrative: though focused on the life stories of narrators such as Charles Ball and Moses Roper, slave narratives treated authors as a means to illuminate and not interpret slavery.²⁸ In William Andrews's words, the genre made of the narrator "an eyewitness, not an I-witness."²⁹ Intended to reorient white readers' moral compasses, the slave narrative's political effectiveness hinged on its status as empirical proof. As a result, a common pro-slavery strategy was to question narratives' authenticity, although narrators did occasionally forge accounts. Shortly after publication, readers discovered the 1836 *Memoirs of Archy Moore* and the 1838 *Narrative of James Williams* to be fictional: the Massachusetts Anti-Slavery Society had distributed and defended the latter in *The Liberator*.³⁰ Although slave narratives were instrumental in swaying the national conversation on slavery as well as raising funds for abolitionist politics, this was a conversation predominantly among whites, the narrative's ex-slave author in the background.

The racial hierarchies borne in part by slavery lingered in abolitionist strategies to authenticate slave narratives. The black ex-slave related his experience in speech or writing, and the white abolitionist validated the story as ghostwriter, amanuensis, or by simply putting his name on it.³¹ Although white testimony occasionally required verification (such as the narratives and letters of Theodore Dwight Weld's 1839 *American Slavery As It Is*, a work that inspired Douglass's writings), here too other white citizens certified the evidence.³² Abolitionists not only warranted ex-slave experience: they interpreted it, in literature and in rhetoric. Jeannine DeLombard writes that the "slavery on trial" motif "portrayed slaveholders as perpetrators and defendants, slaves as victims and witnesses, white abolitionists as advocates for the slave, and the American reading public as a court of public opinion."³³ At the time, black testimony was inadmissible evidence in the American courts. This motif critiqued the laws protecting slavery and appealed to a culture of Jacksonian popular judgment.³⁴