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The “blood-stained gate”:
The Intertextuality of Memory in
Fredrick Douglass's Autobiographies

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ABSTRACT: Frederick Douglass published three autobiographies in his lifetime—The Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass in 1845, My Bondage and My Freedom in 1855, and Life and Times of Frederick Douglass in 1892. Each must be viewed as a distinct work, because the accounts of the same incident in Douglass's life receive different treatments in each autobiography. The question then becomes why Douglass would alter a memory that has already been written down and published. Memories inevitably change and fade as years pass, but how can a memory change when it is already written down? This essay addresses this issue, analyzing significant events in Douglass’ life, such as the whipping of Aunt Hester/Esther and the fight with Mr. Covey, and comes to the conclusion that different political motives inspire Douglass’s revisionist memories.
The very nature of autobiography demands that memory play a pivotal role, for, as James Olney says, narrative and memory are inextricably linked together: the one moving forward, the other going backward, pulling incidents and scenes from earlier in life. Autobiography begins where the two meet: it is the vehicle that carries a private memory into a public narrative. The nature of memory, though, can cause some problems within the genre of autobiography. The act of transforming the immaterial (the abstraction; the idea) into material (the words on a page) can bear troubling implications. Is memory always clear, or can it be distorted? Can memories be misremembered or misrepresented? This problem becomes all the more complicated when one writes multiple autobiographies. Using different diction or writing from different motives leads to numerous discrepancies, which is quite apparent in Frederick Douglass’s three autobiographies: Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, An American Slave (1845), My Bondage and My Freedom (1855), and Life and Times of Frederick Douglass (1892).

“Of course,” states an anonymous reviewer of My Bondage and My Freedom, “it is impossible to say how far the author’s prejudices, and remembrances of wrong, may have deepened the color of his picture, but the general tone of them is truthful” (The Life and Bondage of Frederick Douglass 30). According to Robert Burns Stepto, outside factors can influence the way that a memory is recorded: “We must also recognize the extent to which the abolitionist lecture circuit…gave former slaves an opportunity to structure, to embellish, and above all to polish an oral version of their tale—and to do so before the very audiences who would soon purchase hundreds, if not thousands, of copies of the written account” (230). In Witnesses for Freedom, Rebecca Chalmers Barton states: “Admittedly, the autobiography has limitations as a vehicle for truth…the self-portrait often tends to be formal and posed, idealized or purposefully exaggerated… even if he wishes, he is unable to remember the whole story or to interpret the complete experience” (xii). It is into these murky waters that modern readers wade, as we attempt to discover the truth about memory’s relation to the ex-slave’s autobiography. This essay does not intend to be a comprehensive examination of all the discrepancies among Douglass’s autobiographies; instead, it attempts to explain the way in which different motives caused Douglass to interpret significant memories, such as Aunt Hester’s whipping or his fight with Mr. Covey, in different ways.

To understand the variations in the autobiographies, it would be helpful if we first were to understand the times in which each was written. Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, An American Slave, was first published in 1845, just four years after Douglass escaped slavery. It appeared relatively early in the slave narrative genre, and earned its author instant acclaim. The text provides a picture of the evils of slavery through the eyes of one of its victims. The prefatory material is evidence of this, in which William Lloyd Garrison states: “If Mr. Douglass could be persuaded to consecrate his time and talents to the promotion of the anti-slavery enterprise, a powerful impetus would be given to it” (qtd. in Narrative 271). In a similar vein, Wendell Phillips declares, “There is one circumstance which makes your recollections peculiarly valuable …you come from that part of the country where we are told slavery appears with its fairest features. Let us hear, then, what it is at its best estate” (278). Douglass’s story, then, is not just his story; he also becomes a symbol for “slavery as it is.” His primary motive for memory is political and public, not individual and private. Even the fact that Douglass does not speak in the preface is a testament to his public role. Autobiography becomes a vehicle for the abolitionists’ political causes.

My Bondage and My Freedom has a similar motive. Published in 1855, Douglass’s second autobiography gives an account of his life as a slave and his life as a free man. During the 1850s, increasing political tension concerning slavery threatened to explode into armed conflict. In the introduction, Douglass gives his reasons for writing a second autobiography that ventures into the middle of the conflict: “Not only is slavery on trial, but unfortunately, the enslaved people are also on trial. It is alleged, that they are, naturally, inferior; that they are so low in the scale of humanity, and so utterly stupid, that they are unconscious of their wrongs” (My Bondage viii). The second autobiography, then, is written to prove the humanity of the slaves, as well as to comment on the evils of slavery. And, lest we forget, Dr. James M’Cune Smith reminds us in the introduction that “his attention is not invited to a work of art, but to a work of facts” (qtd. in My Bondage v). Thus, Smith reinforces the idea of autobiography as completely truthful, rather than a collection of imperfect memories.
Frederick Douglass writes his third autobiography, Life and Times of Frederick Douglass, in 1892 to commemorate the final years of his life. The title highlights and emphasizes what Douglass accomplishes after slavery: Life and Times of Frederick Douglass, Written by Himself. His Early Life as a Slave, His Escape from Bondage, and His Complete History to the Present Time, Including His Connection with the Anti-slavery Movement; His Labors in Great Britain as Well as in His Own Country; His Experience in the Conduct of an Influential Newspaper; His Connection with the Underground Railroad; His Relations with John Brown and the Harper's Ferry Raid; His Recruiting the 54th and 55th Mass. Colored Regiments; His Interviews with Presidents Lincoln and Johnson; His Appointment by Gen. Grant to Accompany the Santo Domingo Commission—Also to a Seat in the Council of the District of Columbia; His Appointment as United States Marshal by President R. B. Hayes; Also His Appointment to Be Recorder of Deeds in Washington by President J. A. Garfield; with Many Other Interesting and Important Events of His Most Eventful Life. Of the nearly 150 words that form the title, more than 120 of them are used to describe his life after slavery; with only the first phrases, His Early Life as a Slave, His Escape from Bondage, used to describe the particular part of his life that catapulted him to fame. In "Autobiographical Acts and the Voice of the Southern Slave," Houston A. Baker, Jr. claims, “The Life and Times of Frederick Douglass Written by Himself is public, rooted in the language of its time” (254). This third autobiography finds a famous and elderly Douglass reflecting on his life in the spotlight.

The opening of each autobiography provides clues about the motives behind it. In opening the Narrative with the phrase “I was born,” Douglass confirms his existence as a human being. According to Olney, this phrase is one of the conventions of slave narratives: “prior to the claim of truthfulness is the simple, existential claim: ‘I exist’” (155). A slave narrative needed to make a very different set of assertions than a traditional autobiography. Olney claims the ex-slave must prove that he exists before he can delve into why he wrote the autobiography: “With the ex-slave, however, it was his existence and his identity, not his reasons for writing, that were called into question” (155). Baker describes this process in more powerful language: “His being had to erupt from nothingness” (245).

Thus, the very opening sets the Narrative apart from traditional Western autobiography; Douglass must create his identity as a human being before he can relate the incidents of his life.

The two later autobiographies, however, do not open with “I was born.” My Bondage and My Freedom takes the better part of three paragraphs to set the scene before Douglass finally states: “It was in this dull, flat, and unthrifty district...that I—without any fault of my own—was born, and spent the first years of my childhood” (34). In this same sentence, Douglass describes both the whites and the blacks: “surrounded by a white population of the lowest, indolent and drunken to a proverb, and among slaves, who seemed to ask, ‘Oh, what’s the use? every time they lifted a hoe” (34). Here Douglass’s memory allows the slaves a voice from the very start, while the whites are described negatively. The start of Life and Times is similar, except that Douglass takes less time to describe the surroundings before he is born. And there is a subtle difference in the way that the people are described: “surrounded by a white population of the lowest order, indolent and drunken to a proverb, and among slaves who, in point of ignorance and indolence, were fully in accord with their surroundings” (25). Here, Douglass remembers the slaves and the whites similarly: both are indolent, and neither is provided a voice.

Douglass attempts to move away from the slave narrative genre in these two autobiographies, and into the traditional Western style of autobiography, in which a narrator begins with his motives for writing, rather than his existence. The descriptions of the countryside that precede Douglass’s existence in the second autobiography are evidence that he wants to establish an autobiography that is not wholly about slavery—it is about the individual life of accomplishments of a singular man as well. He is unable, though, to distance himself from the slave narrative: despite the fact that he has already established his existence in a previous autobiography and through his public life of service, he still feels the need to utter those words “I was born.” Douglass reaffirms his existence for himself, and remembers his identity, in the form of condition: I was born, I was a slave.

The dissonance arising from multiple variations of multiple memories continues with one of the more famous scenes from the life of Frederick Douglass: the whipping of Aunt Hester, a quotation from which forms part of this essay’s title. In the 1845 Narrative, Douglass informs his readers that this was one of the defining
moments in his life, for it was when he became aware of his condition as a slave:

I never shall forget it whilst I remember any thing. It was the first of a long series of such outrages, of which I was doomed to be a witness and a participant. It struck me with awful force. It was the blood-stained gate, the entrance to the hell of slavery, through which I was about to pass...I wish I could commit to paper the feelings with which I beheld it. (284; my italics)

In this scene, Douglass the writer is remembering Douglass the child. Such self-reflection is found throughout the first autobiography, in which Douglass merges past and present. Douglass is aware that he is writing (“I wish I could commit to paper”), and he also provides a symbolic image (“the blood-stained gate”). The terrors of slavery are emphasized in his effort to provide a firsthand account of slavery’s violence. Douglass is “so terrified and horror-stricken at the sight, that [he] hid [him]self in a closet” (285).

Although Douglass claims that “I never shall forget it” in his first autobiography, we find a different account of this defining moment in the second autobiography. Aunt Hester becomes Aunt Esther, a small linguistic change, but still a clue that Douglass reconsiders his original memory. Why change Hester to Esther unless unsure about her name? Also, the “blood-stained gate” is conspicuously absent, and, in its place, Douglass places a less moving passage:

The circumstances which I am about to narrate, and which gave rise to this fearful tempest of passion, are not singular nor isolated in slave life, but are common in every slaveholding community in which I have lived. They are incidental to the relation of master and slave, and exist in all sections of slave-holding countries. (My Bondage 85)

Douglass adopts the voice of an anthropologist who observes the “slaveholding community,” as opposed to the terrified slave who is inevitably intertwined in the fabric of slave life. He maintains the tone of the observer throughout the entire scene. “I happened to see this exhibition of his rage and cruelty toward Esther,” Douglass says, “the time selected was singular” (87).

The closet is no longer Douglass’s hiding place; instead, it is his bedroom: “My sleeping place was on the floor of a little, rough closet.”

While he apparently cannot describe his feelings in the Narrative, Douglass successfully conveys his feelings and attitudes in My Bondage: “From my heart I pitied her, and—child though I was—the outrage kindled in me a feeling far from peaceful; but I was hushed, terrified, stunned, and could do nothing” (88). Yet many readers are left feeling unconvinced, because the tone with which Douglass writes is detached, almost insincere. In order to understand this detached narrative voice, I would like to borrow two terms from W.J.T. Mitchell’s essay “Narrative, Memory, and Slavery”: diegesis and mimesis. Mitchell uses these terms to refer to discourse and narration, but they also apply to different types of narration: diegesis is the act of performing a story, while mimesis is the act of imitating it, or merely telling it (205). In other words, it comes down to the old writer’s creed: show, don’t tell. The Narrative is an example of diegesis, and My Bondage of mimesis. When Douglass speaks of “the blood-stained gate” in the Narrative, he performs his narrative, in other words, he is, in a sense, reliving it. In My Bondage and My Freedom, he is telling his story, mimicking it, without truly remembering it. He tells us he was “hushed, terrified, stunned,” yet he does not explain what that entails. Did he gasp? Call out? Did he curl up in the back of the closet and close his eyes? In a way, he is remembering the memory of it, removed from it an extra degree, and committing what Mitchell calls “the absolute prevention of experience” (202). The result, then, is a less sincere, less moving passage, despite the more finely-tuned description.

Douglass describes an even crueler Captain Anthony, Hester/Esther’s torturer, in the second autobiography. Anthony had “cowskin in hand, preparing his barbarous work with all manner of harsh, course, and tantalizing epithets. The screams of his victim were most piercing,” while he “protracted the torture, as one who was delighted with the scene” (My Bondage 87). The political motive of Douglass’s narrative (i.e., abolitionism) proves the humanity of the slaves by contrasting them with the barbarity of the slaveholders. Esther is punished because she sneaks away to see her lover, and thereby breaks Anthony’s command. Douglass further explains her deeply human and romantic reasons for doing so: “a woman's love,” Douglass says, “is not to be annihilated by the peremptory command of anyone” (86). She “was evidently much attached to Edward, and abhorred—as
she had reason to do—the tyrannical and base behavior of old master” (86).

Yet such humanist, romantic descriptions of (H)Esther are nowhere to be found in the 1845 Narrative, and the language used to describe Captain Anthony is not nearly as harsh. The scene’s revisionist second edition is singular for the condemnation of Captain Anthony’s actions by Esther herself—she “abhorred the tyrannical and base behavior of old master.” Douglass speaks on behalf of his aunt, and thereby asserts her awareness of the master’s cruelty, revealing that the slave is in active rebellion against it. Esther’s love for Edward is far stronger than her fear of being whipped: her humanity—love—wins out against her master’s brutality. She has already seen her lover, and she will take the punishment, even as she is aware that she herself is more human than her master.

In Life and Times, Douglass’s outrage in the same scene is transformed into shock and disbelief: “From my heart I pitied her, and child as I was, and new to such scenes, the shock was tremendous” (55). Esther’s humanity and romance are no longer emphasized, but taken for granted: “But it was impossible to keep this couple apart. Meet they would and meet they did” (54). Douglass no longer fears being “next” in line for violence. The scene has taken a reminiscent, nostalgic quality, and he describes it concisely, with no real meaning for himself. Though he may “never forget the scene,” Douglass certainly "remembers," or narrates, it differently, the past perhaps colored by the political atmosphere of the times, in which there is no need to argue against slavery or for the slaves’ humanity.

Douglass also revises the memories of his mother through the multiple editions of his autobiographies. Her absence or her guiding love are powerful influences on him, and she plays a large role in the political aims of each autobiography. In the 1845 Narrative, Douglass uses his mother to focus on the dehumanizing aspects of slavery. He says, “My mother and I were separated when I was but an infant—before I knew her as my mother” (281). There is a fixation on describing “slavery as it is,” or the institution’s sanctioned cruelty and abuses: “It is a common custom…to part children from their mothers at a very early age” (282). Douglass claims to have no real feelings for his mother:

I never saw my mother, to know her as such, more than four or five times in my life…Never having enjoyed, to any considerable extent, her soothing presence, her tender and watchful care, I received the tidings of her death with much the same emotions I should have probably felt at the death of a stranger. (282)

This description of his mother as a “stranger” is enhanced through the absence of any kind of physical description of her. Mitchell’s “absolute prevention of memory” comes into play here in the Narrative, as Douglass tries to give an account of his mother without recounting all the painful details. It accomplishes a second purpose as well: it paints a barbaric picture of slavery, as Douglass admits that the consequences of her absence cause slaves to look on their mothers as strangers.

My Bondage and My Freedom takes a much different view of Douglass’s mother, in comparison to his descriptions in the 1845 Narrative. In the second edition of his autobiography, Douglass minimizes the separation aspect of his relationship with his mother, while he emphasizes (and introduces, for the first time) her physical characteristics: “She was tall, and finely proportioned; of deep black, glossy complexion; had regular features, and, among other slaves, was remarkably sedate in her manners” (My Bondage 52). Whereas the 1845 Douglass says, “I never saw my mother, to know her as such,” in My Bondage and My Freedom, he claims: “Her personal appearance and bearing are ineffaceably stamped upon my memory” (53). Instead of the tragic dehumanization of slaves through the absent mother, Douglass describes their humanity and his own painful maternal memories: “The pains she took, and the toil she endured, to see me, tells me that a true mother’s heart was hers, and that slavery had difficulty in paralyzing it with unmotherly indifference” (53).

Furthermore, Douglass’s second edition takes a certain amount of pride in his (absent) mother, especially once he learns that she can read: “I learned, after my mother’s death, that she could read, and that she was the only one of all the slaves and colored people in Tuckahoe who enjoyed that advantage” (58). This second edition describes his mother’s literacy, and her character as well. The rebelliousness that Douglass finds in other slaves in Bondage and Freedom is also manifest in his mother: “There was pity in her glance at me, and a fiery indignation
at Aunt Katy at the same time" (56). Finally, his mother's death is also revised in the second edition. Instead of the unemotional death of a stranger that Douglass feels in the 1845 Narrative, his mother's death greatly influences Douglass in My Bondage and Freedom: "The side view of her face is imaged on my memory, and I take few steps in life, without feeling her presence" (57).

The final edition of Douglass's autobiography stays true to the account Douglass gives in Bondage and Freedom. His new memories about his mother reinforce Douglass's identity as singular among the slaves: "In view of this fact, I am happy to attribute any love of letters I may have, not to my presumed Anglo-Saxon paternity, but to the native genius of my sable, unprotected, and uncultivated mother" (Life and Times 39). He finds the origins for his genius and accomplishments in his slave mother, not his white father, in order to affirm the slaves' status as human, even superior to white slave owners. Baker claims: "The white externality has been transformed into a world where sterling deeds by blacks are possible" (254). The slaves, from Douglass's point of view in 1892, are not only human, but have the ability and the potential to succeed and surpass, not just survive, in a white man's world.

One more example should suffice to illustrate Douglass' revisionist memories in each autobiography. The account of Douglass's fight with the notorious slave-breaker Mr. Covey bears substantial differences between the Narrative and the two later autobiographies. In the Narrative, Douglass's strength to fight against the cruel slave breaker, Mr. Covey, comes from his determination to be free: "My long-crushed spirit rose, cowardice departed, bold defiance took its place; and I now resolved that, however long I might remain a slave in form, the day had passed forever when I could be a slave in fact" (331). Douglass calls this fight the "turning-point" in his life as a slave, and describes the fight as a resurrection and a revival: "It rekindled the few expiring embers of freedom, and revived within me a sense of my own manhood" (330). During the fight, Covey calls another hired slave to help restrain Douglass, but the slave refuses: "Bill said his master hired him out to work, and not to help you whip Frederick" (My Bondage 245). Here again Douglass gives the slaves a voice to emphasize their humanity—even their courage. Bill speaks, and even refers directly to Douglass. Bill is given a character and a personality. Another new element in the fight scene, which occurs in the later autobiographies, is the addition of a female slave, Caroline. In the second and third editions of the autobiography, Caroline also refuses to help Covey: "Caroline answered the command of her master to, 'take hold of me,' precisely as Bill had answered, but in her, it was at greater peril so to answer; she was the slave of Covey, and he could do what he pleased with her" (330). Caroline allows Douglass to introduce an entirely new issue into the scene: the uniquely cruel treatment of female slaves. Yet Caroline does not receive a voice—she does not speak directly—as Douglass gives just a surface treatment to the issue. Like Aunt Hester/Esther, Douglass speaks for her.

Moreover, the fight's significance—what the fight represents—changes in the later autobiographies. The later editions explain the fight as Douglass's call for slaves to rebel: "We were all in open rebellion, that morning." That line does not occur in the Narrative, nor does the not-so-subtle poem that concludes the incident: "Hereditary bondmen, know ye not / Who would be free, themselves must strike the blow?" (249). Douglass transforms Covey into a snake-like creature that echoes Satan: in the Narrative, Covey "enters" the stable, but in the later autobiographies, Covey "sneaked into the stable, in his peculiar snake-like way" (242). The message in Bondage and Freedom is an overt one: slaves need to stand up against the brutal and evil behavior of the slaveholders. Douglass claims: "A man, without force, is without the essential dignity of humanity" (My Bondage 247).

None of this is to claim that Douglass manufactures or makes up certain incidents or characters in his life. It is possible to reconcile the autobiographies. The differences in memory among the autobiographies nevertheless raise an interesting question: should these be taken as works of art or works of fact? The editors of each autobiography and Douglass himself insist that all is fact, that the autobiographies are meant to shed light on the horrors of slavery, as the editor of My Bondage and
Freedom asserts in the preface: “A man who was born and brought up in slavery, a living witness of its horrors… might very well assume the existence of a commendable curiosity, on the part of the public, to know the facts of his remarkable history” (viii). And yet, we find passages of such self-awareness and subtlety that it is difficult to reject the idea of art (i.e. “artifice”) in Douglass’s writings. The answer, then, is a complicated yes: Douglass’s autobiographies are both art and fact.

The memories and significant incidents may change from autobiography to autobiography, but what remains is the same basic truth. To Douglass, Aunt Hester/Esther’s whipping was horrific and memorable. His mother loomed large over his childhood and stamped herself on his personality, whether through her absence or her memory. The fight with Covey was a turning point for Douglass, whether because it renewed his desire for freedom, or gave him proof that open rebellion works. The memories, the autobiographies, serve to strengthen each other; the three of them work together to weave the events of Douglass’s life as a slave into a historically significant and poignant tapestry.
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