THE IDENTITY OF THE AUTHOR AS EVIDENCED IN THE NARRATIVE OF FREDERICK DOUGLASS, AN AMERICAN SLAVE, WRITTEN BY HIMSELF

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> I have seen dark hours in my life, and I have seen the darkness gradually disappearing, and the light gradually increasing.
>
> Frederick Douglass, 7 December 1890
>
> The life of Frederick Douglass is part of the legend of America.
>
> John F. Kennedy

This paper is not simply an account of the odyssey of a slave boy who "made good" by acquiring literacy, self-identity and freedom against indomitable odds. Other writers have explored this triad theme. The critical question for me concerns the identity of the man, Frederick Douglass. Was Douglass a creation of white culture? Was he a recreation of the author in his several autobiographies? Was he his own person? Since his life was one of negation and continuous rebellion, was he ever truly free? Who is the man hiding behind the masks of litterateur, self-made citizen and freedman? These are the questions I have chosen to explore.

One popular theory presented by scholars is that an undeniable cultural mix existed in America during the historical period marked by slavery. Native Africans and their American-born offspring were able to retain certain Africanisms, assumed some Americanisms, put it all

together and created an African-American-ism. It appears that Douglass belongs to this tradition. Even though he assumed the characteristics of the white culture for survival, as did so many other slaves, he employed these characteristics for his own[1] literary purposes. In so doing he created an African American literary legacy. It is generally accepted that the national biographer of the United States is Benjamin Franklin who established in his autobiography the most complete and laudatory text of the typical American life story, the self-made man. However, if Franklin is *the* American biographer, then Frederick Douglass must similarly represent the same image for the African-American literary tradition because Douglass' slave narrative is the most completely representative in this genre. While chronicling the efforts of a black man to attain his identity in a culture that reduced him to subhuman level, the document is a founding one in the African American tradition.

The comfortable fit of Douglass' text within the Franklin gridwork is evident from the title, *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, Written by Himself*. The original title of Franklin's autobiography was *Memoires de la vie priveé de Benjamin Franklin, ecrits par lui-meme.* After Franklin's death this book was published in English in 1793 as *The Private Life of the Late Benjamin Franklin...Originally Written by Himself and Now Translated from the French.* Later that same year this text became *Works of the Late Doctor Benjamin Franklin Consisting of His Life Written by Himself, Together with Essays, Humorous, Moral and Literary, Chiefly in the Manner of the Spectator*. The recurring tag line in these three titles is essential to Douglass' title, just as it is essential

[1]See James Olney, "Autobiographical Traditions Black and White," in *Autobiography: Essays Theoretical and Critical.*

to the titles of many slave narratives. However "written by himself" was more meaningful when attached to Douglass' title than when affixed to Franklin's narrative. The words "written by himself" in Douglass' title are proud testament by the author to his achieving success and power. This prideful boast is excusable when one considers how restrictive were conditions in 1835 for a learned former slave to write his way to freedom. It was obvious to the eighteenth century American reader that Franklin, a signer of the Declaration of Independence and many other founding documents, was capable of writing his own life story. But since the white culture never intended that a slave should learn to read and write and thus possess the power of penning his own narrative, let alone declare his freedom and independence, a former slave was suspect as the author of his own text. Nonetheless Douglass proved his story to be authentic.

Since its publication in 1845 the *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, an American Slave Written by Himself* is unchallenged as the classic slave narrative. While Benjamin Franklin is credited with establishing the traditional American rags-to-riches story, Douglass' narrative is more profound. It chronicles the transcendence of a black slave from subhuman level to that of stunning orator, journalist and political rights activist of the nineteenth century. Like Franklin's *Autobiography* the narrative of Douglass is a founding document intended to motivate. In Douglass' case it was to lead slaves toward freedom and to play a role in making slavery abhorrent to its victims. Yet it went still further. While the *Narrative* asserted the freedom of American slaves as the Declaration of Independence had not, it exposed at the same time the cannibalism of a white culture which consumed human flesh for economic gain. The *Narrative* was a literary act of aggression against white slave

holders. Nothing in Franklin's text matches this despite the fact that it attacked white American independence from European colonization. Douglass' text further established the literary tradition of autobiography among southern black writers focusing on the triple themes of literacy, identity and freedom.

It is possible to retitle the *Narrative*. For instance it could be called the *Portrait of an Artist on his Odyssey Toward Literary, Political and Personal Freedom*. Yet the key words to the title belong to Douglass' "Written by Himself." The ability to pen these words was won at great price. When Douglass reached the end of his journey, he had attained intellectual, political and gendered parity with the world of the white middle class. As a child he learned that the key to this parity was literacy. Along the way he conquered enemies and obstacles alike by using self-discipline and restraint. When he reached freedom in the North, Douglass sought full release in language which testified to man's ability to achieve independence despite the roots of illiteracy. In his life story Douglass recreated himself as he progressed from slave to exslave to freedman. Always present was the insistent search for voice, and for control of that voice as an outsider in a white world struggling to come to terms with white values and mores. Peculiar to me because of its absence from the life story is any expression of filial attachment.

"The white children could tell their ages. I could not," Douglass writes (*Narrative 18*). In a society where most children knew their birth dates as well as the names of their fathers, Douglass was ignorant. Rumor within the slave compound was that the slavemaster himself had fathered Douglass, but this was never proven. If such were the case theirs could have been nothing more than a most unnnatural relationship. Nonetheless, without a father the boy had no identity. His mother,

Harriet Bailey, was known to the boy. At least, he saw her a few times before her death. They had been separated by the master/sire shortly after Douglass' birth when Harriet was hired out by the master/sire to a nearby farmer. This cruel practice of separating offspring and mothers was commonly used by white masters to thwart the natural bonding between mother and child (Christian 692). The few occasions when Harriet met her son were nocturnal encounters because Harriet slipped away from the farm after dark to avoid detection. (The penelty for being caught was a severe whipping.) Each time the two met in this manner the mother was gone before the child awakened to be back in the fields before sunup. After her death when young Douglass was about seven years old, he claimed not to have felt the loss of a person he barely knew. Each of the four times the mother is mentioned in the *Narrative* Douglass regrets, not that she died, but callously that she died without revealing his patrimony. Considering the circumstances of his conception, the rape of slave mother by the master, it is reasonable to assume that the name of the father of her child was abhorrent to Harriet Bailey. This was undoubtedly her reason for withholding his father's identity from her son.

According to Barbara Christian the black field slave whose mulatto baby is taken from her to be raised in the greathouse, as was Harriet's young Douglass, had mixed emotions. "The birth of such a child heightened the emotional pain of being a slave." On a practical level, the black field slave must have wondered about the loyalty of her mulatto child (693). Douglass later replayed the drama of his childhood by attempting to replace the mother figure with a series of women beginning with Sophie Auld and ending many years later with his second wife, both of whom were white women. In the case of Harriet, the natural mother/son relationship was impoverished and unnatural. His mother's death

deprived Douglass of an identity, birthdate, family name and family structure. The little mulatto boy observed firsthand the culture of the white world as a house slave, a privilege denied to field saves. The codes of the southern caste system created these slave restrictions. In approximately fifteen years however Douglass proved himself an apt observer of white manners and customs when he became an accomplished speaker and writer in the same world he had once served as slave. Yet because of his rhetorical approach to language, Douglass has been accused by critics of accepting the perspectives as well as the language of[2] the white oppressor. While there may be some truth here, this is not a totally fair accusation. In the 1800's there were no books or examples of African American scholarship available to Douglass that could suggest alternatives to white scholarship, the only culture to which he had been exposed other than the slave culture. In order to survive in the South he had to learn white rhetoric. And because Douglass was an exceptional man it was inevitable that his rhetoric assume the acculturation of the dominant society for survival rather than that of the African American free culture. Nothing exists to suggest that another slave could not have done the same, but Douglass was alone in this accomplishment.

However there is one moment in the *Narrative* when Douglass deliberately called upon an established African American culture. This occurred when he described the songs of the field slaves returning to the greathouse from outlying farms. Their tones were jubilant when they were most oppressed and mournful when they were happy, an opposition

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[2]Read Albert E. Stone, *Identity and Art,* 1973; Thomas Couser, *American Biography,* 1979; James Olney, "I Was Born," 1985; and John Sekora, *Comprehending Slavery,* 1985.

to the white culture to which the *Narrative* otherwise ascribes. What Douglass suggested about the slave songs is the little-understood credo of the African-American culture in which survival demanded that a slave mask rather than project his true feelings, which poses the problem of reality. What or who is real in this kind of society? When does a man know that he is being true to himself? The need to be constantly on guard or in a state of rebellion creates someone who is not real hiding behind the mask. This credo accounts in part for the stereotypical reasoning of a white culture which maintained that all blacks were deceitful and hence not to be trusted. Douglass illustrated the slave's ambivalence toward honesty with an incident in the *Narrative* when a slave, returning to the greathouse after a spell on an outlying farm, encountered his master, Captain Lloyd, whom he failed to recognize. Queried about the inherent goodness of his master the slave told the truth about his master's cruelty. As a "reward" for his honesty he was sold down river, a fate which signified the slave's doom. Obviously certain virtues of honesty and directness were not permissible under the conditions of slavery when to be honest and direct meant death or worse (being sold downriver) for the slave. Meanwhile white slaveholders continued to misunderstand the slave songs. Upon hearing the joyous tones of their songs they felt justfied in ownership believing they had brought happiness to the souls of their unfortunate victims. Slave society was a schizophrenic one and created people who lived duplicitous lives. This was as true of blacks as of whites, of women as of men.

Each incident in the *Narrative* was carefully selected to mark the passage of Douglass the slave to freedom through literacy. One particular episode in the Narrative recounts the precise moment when young Douglass becomes aware of the power of language. When the boy was

brought into the greathouse as slave to the young master, Mrs.Auld, the young master's mother, began teaching the two boys their letters. This was Douglass' first encounter with literacy, however before long her husband cautioned the kindly woman to discontinue this practice because, "Learning would spoil the best nigger in the world...it would forever unfit him to be a slave." (*Narrative* 47) Auld's words overheard by the boy made clear their meaning to him. Douglass tells his reader:

> From that moment I understood the pathway from slavery to freedom... I was gladdened by the invaluable instruction which, by the merest accident, I had gained from my master. (47)

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As the eight-year-old comprehended the structure of slavery, he was instantly aware that his ticket to freedom was the language and literary mode of the white oppressor and he determined to acquire, however difficult, his fare for passage on the freedom train. In the course of his brief narrative Douglass relates the major steps of his journey. One, the often-quoted account of his liberating encounter with Edward Covey, is most significant. As a young man Douglass, high spirited and rebellious, was sent to Covey's plantation to be tamed by the famous "nigger breaker" but the reverse happened. At first Douglass' spirit was crushed by a torturous work schedule and fear of the brutal Covey. But somehow the young man's spirit was rekindled by the sight of tall ships sailing freely in nearby Chesapeake Bay. Shortly after the two men had a physical confrontation. Of these experiences Douglass writes, "You have seen how a man was made a slave; you shall see how a slave was made a man." (72) In the ensuing fight Douglass emerged unbloodied,

confident and victorious. Of this he says in the *Narrative*::

> 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. (8)

Douglass' defiance of the white master was the turning point in his life. As he acquired mainstream culture Douglass learned that white freedom is partially defined by competition with other men. The Covey incident manifested this white concept. It is important at this point to note that, in their encounter, the slave Douglass never inflicted serious bodily injury on Covey although he could easily have killed the man. His combat, then and forever, would be an intellectual battle of wills; his weapons, words. From this moment on, while a white master owned Douglass' slave body, he no longer controlled his free spirit. Douglass had fully assumed the cultural survival skills of deception in order to live in a white society.

While the physical encounter with Covey was significant, writing became vital to Douglass' identity. He knew its significance in two ways; not only would it afford him escape into the white world, writing would enable him later to create his own personhood. The telling words in the title of his first life story "written by himself", proclaim Douglass' independence of the majority culture. However, long before producing the *Narrative* Douglass wrote other documents by himself to herald his personal independence. In an aborted escape attempt in 1835 Douglass prepared passes. These were permission slips written by white slave owners, to protect their slaves on journeys. Douglass' passes were forged by him to protect three slaves and himself in their flight ot freedom. They read:

> This is to certify that I, the undersigned, have given the bearer, my servant, full liberty to go to Baltimore and spend the Easter holidays. Written with mine own hand, Sc., 1835.
> William Hamilton, near St.Michael's in Talbot County, Maryland. (24)

These words clearly demonstrate the young man's increasing sense of language manipulation and indicate the distance he traveled since that day when his reading and writing lessons were halted. It is further astonishing to read in the *Narrative* that Douglass and his companions destroyed the passes by eating them when the escape plan was exposed. Therefore what Douglass reproduced in his text years later is a recollection of the wording of the passes. Since these passes were a meaningful step on Douglass' road to freedom, it is apparent that this recall cannot be a fabrication.

It was shortly after arriving in the North that Douglass found his public voice and began writing and speaking his way to freedom. This role as public figure originated in Nantucket, Massachusetts in 1841 at an antislavery convention where he felt moved, for the first time, to address an audience extemporaneously. This was one of the last steps on his road toward freedom and selfhood. Nontheless the path was still littered with obstructions. Most primitive narratives are full of the voices of their narrators recalling the subjects' ordeals. Most are full as well of other voices that are integral to the narrative. Some of these may be actual characters in the account and as such are essential to the story of the slave's achievement. However other voices are there lending support and authenticity to the writer's tale. Robert B.Stepto suggests in *Behind*

the Veil that all of these voices establish a dialog with the author of the text and become an integral part of the narrative until at last all voices blend in chorus as one. Douglass was searching for his own identity so he not only documents his slave voice but presents his historical self in the voice of narrator. Beyond the pose of narrator Douglass articulates the voices of participant and observer as well. The major role of the narrator reveals Douglass' participation and art of storytelling, all of which depend for effect as much upon what he does not recount as on what he does recount.

Voices other than that of Douglass appear as well. For instance, within the frame of the *Narrative* appears a preface composed by William Lloyd Garrison as well as a letter addressed to "My Dear Friend" from Wendell Phillips; both of these men were feisty Abolitionist leaders. The preface, coupled with the unobtrusive appearance of Garrison in the final pages of the *Narrative*, manifests a neat balancing act by Douglass who frames his life story with the words of the abolitionists yet at the same time establishes his own authority within the text. There exists an apparent tension for control of the text between narrative, supporting preface and letter. However what binds the narrative is an energy between text and supporting documents, in other words between the voice of Douglass and the voice of others. Theoretically the introductory documents to a slave narrative guaranteed a distrustful, white reading public the authenticity of the author as former slave, but these particular documents of Garrison and Phillips which introduce Douglass' narrative and further support it, extend beyond authentification and actually intrude upon the text. Garrison is more concerned with an historical account of the Nantucket Anti-Slavery Convention that launched Douglass on the lecture circuit and his own place in that convention, than with

Douglass' authenticity as exslave. He almost dismisses Douglass to write himself into the account. Specifically he says, "I shall never forget his (Douglass') first speech at the Convention." A little later he writes, "I rose and declared that Patrick Henry...never made a speech more eloquent in the cause of freedom..." And again, "I reminded the audience...," and, "I appealed to them..." (4-9) it is his own glory and not Douglass' to which he alludes in the preface. (*African-American Literature* 183) Here the words "written by himself" from the title page convey another implicit and paradoxical connotation beyond selfhood. Although Douglass fled north to escape the bondage of slavery, he discovered there a new kind of bondage. The only route to freedom for the slave was literacy. But once the slave began to express himself, the social structure of the white culture that supported him also distrusted his existence, which presented the paradoxical problem of the nature of the exslave. Further, Garrison confused the sponsorship of Douglass in the Abolitionist Party with ownership, exploiting him as a representative of his own race. He even attempted to influence the exslave to speak in the dialect of a southern slave rather than in his own cultivated tongue to prove to audiences that Douglass had indeed once been a plantation slave. Douglass finally alienated himself from the Garrison group because he refused to enslave himself again by bending to their base demands which included an unwillingness for him, a black man, to speak his own mind. This break with his Garrisonian mentors further separated Douglass from the white world which already distrusted him because of his freedom, because of his literacy, and because of his mixed blood. Such a man, they reasoned, could only be a fraud since it was impossible for a slave to possess Douglass' mastery of language and refinement. At the same time he was too white in complexion to be accepted as black. Blacks

distrusted him not only because of his literacy but because of his acceptance by whites. Consequently, despite apparent freedom, Douglass was not totally accepted in the North as a free man. Eventually he escaped this binding "freedom" by fleeing to Rochester, New York where he worked independently and unencumbered to promote the cause of black slaves through his own newspaper, *The North Star* (later called *Frederick Douglass' Paper*), and through his other writings.

Meanwhile in his preface to the *Narrative* Garrison ended not by referring to Douglass or to the *Narrative,* but with burning verbiage designed to ignite the fire of an excitable anti-slavery crowd in the manner of a revivalist preacher. Rather than guarantee Douglass' text as a valid slave narrative the Preface reestablished Garrison's reputation as The Abolitionist. Nonetheless despite the passion of Garrison's rhetoric, the shape and energy of Douglass' text removed the narrative itself from the documents of both Garrison and Phillips. The exslave's story dominates and authenticates regardless of the presence of the other two voices. It was to verify his own existence and testify to his literary skills that Douglass wrote the *Narrative*, not to satisfy the Abolitionists. He no longer permitted himself to be censored or dominated by a white culture. "You have seen how a man is made a slave..." he asserted in his narrative. Douglass had written himself free of all strictures.

Unlike Garrison's preface, Phillips' letter "To My Dear Friend" was addressed to Douglass, or so one assumes. Possibly it was directed toward the reader. By the nature of its form the letter suggests an equality between the white man and the black man on a level of linguistics and morality that is unusual, hence the doubt as to the addressee. Nevertheless Douglass identified himself as the writer of the narrative following the letter, by signing his own name after Phillips' signature to

the letter. He further established his capability as a litterateur by producing a very moving manuscript despite being black and despite being a former slave. While the Garrison and Phillips' documents are an integral part of the narrative, they remain outside the text. Douglass does not require these testimonies to establish his literary identity because he incorporates his own documents into the text where they become, like the passes, his declaration of independence from the dominant culture.

The last few lines of Douglass' tale assume a distinct purpose. Douglass recalled the anti-slavery convention at Nantucket first mentioned in the preface by Garrison. His words bring the reader full circle to Garrison's words:

> But, while attending an anti-slavery convention at Nantucket on the 11th of August, 1841, I felt strongly moved to speak, and at the same time was much urged to do so by Mr.William C.Coffin, a gentleman who had heard me speak in the colored people's meeting at New Bedford. It was a severe cross and I took it up reluctantly. The truth was I felt myself a slave, and the idea of speaking to white people weighed me down. I spoke but a few moments, when I felt a degree of freedom, and said what I desired with considerable ease. From that time until now, I have been engaged in pleading the cause of my brethren-with what success, and with what devotion, I leave those acquainted with my labors to decide. (119-120)

This is a delightful maneuver in the sense of linguistic balance; further it is a clever rhetorical stratagem because it places Douglass with Garrison in the same audience recalling his own words at the convention. By thus framing the Narrative with the Nantucket episode Douglass replaced Garrison and became his own historian. In the end the slave who found his own voice had learned to use language as skillfully as the majority culture. The Phillips and Garrison documents become little more than a pair of decorative bookends. The text is dominated by the strident voice of the writer who controls, not only his life story, but the authentication of that story.

In the Appendix which concludes the *Narrative* Douglass echoed the original Declaration of Independence in declaring freedom and independence for all American slaves by defiantly attesting to the immorality of slavery in a Christian world:

> Sincerely and earnestly hoping that this little book may do something toward throwing light on the American slave system and hastening the glad day of deliverance to the millions of my brethren in bonds- faithfully relying upon the power of truth, love, and justice, for success in my humble efforts-and solemnly pledging myself anew to the sacred cause, -I subscribe myself, Frederick Douglass. (*Slavery and Literary* 7)

Just as Douglass pledged, subscribed and signed his name to his document, Benjamin Franklin and other founding fathers of America had pledged, subscribed and signed themselves to the exclusionary Declaration of Independence which offered no freedom to slaves.

> We, therefore, the Representatives of the United States of America, in General Congress, Assembled, appealing to the Supreme Judge of the World for the Rectitude of our Intentions, do, in the Name, and by the Authority of the good People of these Colonies, solemnly Publish and Declare that these United Colonies are, and of Right ought to be, Free and Independent States...And for the support of this Declaration, with a firm Reliance on the Protection of Divine Providence we mutually pledge to each other our Lives, our Fortunes, and our sacred Honor.
>
> [The list of personal signatures follows.](8)

This posture of Douglass in imitation of America's founding document was deliberately intended to restore the national ideal denied the black race in practice by the founders of the government "...that all Men are created Equal..." It is this same ideal that has infused the literary tradition of African American writers since.

No one doubts that the *Narrative* establishes Douglass' freedom from human bondage. Still, at the end of his journey toward freedom Douglass found himself fettered again, both politically and socially. Despite his personal declaration of independence, he was not truly free in the emancipated North. While Douglass' reconstruction of his freedom in the *Narrative* was intended to liberate him forever, his text failed to accomplish this dream. Emerson suggests that complete liberation is freedom from all restrictions. Douglass found that such freedom exists only in an ideal society. While Douglass proved himself an eloquent, impassioned survivor of negrocide, the publication of his autobiography

endangered the liberty of the exslave. Encouraged by friends he fled to Europe where he spent two years abroad often lecturing throughout England, Ireland, Scotland and Wales. It was two white women in Ireland who eventually purchased Douglass' indenture from Thomas Auld, freeing him to return to America.

In America he continued his work as an activist in Black American affairs for seventeen years. While famous for oratorical and speech-writing skills, Douglass was a journalist at heart. As editor of his own newspapers he gave that heart to the campaign not only against black slavery but against any form of enslavement, including women's rights which he saw as inseparable from the broader ideals of human equality and unity transcending obvious biological and physiological differnces between the sexes. He viewed women as "fully equal [to man] in moral, mental and intellectual endowments." As a result woman was "entitled to an equal participancy in all the designs and accomplishments allotted to man during his career on earth" (Narrative, 279) Douglass viewed all women as equal in natural rights and duties regardless of sex or race. The great goal of universal emancipation therefore necessitated the liberation of oppressed women as well as oppressed racial and ethnic minorities.

The *Narrative* of Frederick Douglass is more than an account of a self-made man. It is a radical document made by one who began in slavery but broke the fetters and overthrew his oppressors. As a declaration of independence "written by himself" the text echoes that earlier national document which upholds the right of Americans to revolt against enslavement. Douglass was deliberate in echoing the final words and patterns of the national document. Moreover the narrative of his passage to freedom is quite like the initial account of the abuses and trans-

gressions of the King of England, and the need for Americans to break away from British rule. What had been written into this country's founding document but immediately denied-"that all men are created equal," was rewritten by Frederick Douglass to assert the concept of "nation" as both American and as African American.

The point has been made that Douglass' life story extends beyond the limits of literary and political statement of black independence, that it is principally a personal declaration of independence. Through rhetoric Douglass obviously freed himself from southern strictures, from those Abolitionists who doubted his credibility as former slave, and from those who sought to restrict him with dictums like desiring him to speak in public with a strong black dialect. By writing the *Narrative* Douglass created a life for himself designed to offer release from the fate of black existence. However, despite his independently created freedom, Douglass was never truly free because he was never fully accepted by the dominant culture.

The *Narrative* reveals more than the horror and inhumanity of slavery. It reveals the souls of white people: those who attended church on Sunday, expressed belief in the American principles of democracy, and yet enslaved others. Douglass' purpose went beyond shedding light on American slavery to hasten its demise. It was much more personal. He wished to create for himself an identity that had ever been withheld by private and public restrictions. Within the *Narrative* he freed himself and in so doing created a model and literary genre as well for future African Americans.

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