The Authority of the Slave Narrative

How Mary Prince and Frederick Douglass Contributed to Abolition

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Revised 13 Nov. 2012
I read, I write, therefore I am ~ Annette Niemtzow

There can be little doubt in modern minds that the institution of slavery is and was one of the most horrific examples of human cruelty in the history of Homo sapiens. The capacity for human brutality reached new and nearly unbelievable heights with the slave trade, and slave narratives worked to expose that vicious tradition so that readers could abolish it. Both Britain and the United States struggled long and hard for emancipation, and Mary Prince and Frederick Douglass, two slaves, one from the West Indies, the other from the United States, used their slave narratives to fight for freedom. Both of their narratives made the abstract idea of slavery a reality. Through factual and emotional evidence and with the help of their abolitionist supporters, Prince and Douglass validated their experiences so that white readers could no longer deny the truth of what slavery was. The use of the English language, a representation of the dominant white culture, functions as a way to bear witness to a personal and collective slave experience. The slave narrative, as a genre, works to dispel the commonly held view that slaves were no better than beasts. While England may have led the way for emancipation, the United-States soon followed suit, and while slave narratives were certainly not the sole voice of opposition, they contributed greatly to the cause. Prince and Douglass are but two of the numerous voices raised in protest, but they represent the voice of experience, and give voice to the dead. In this manner the slave narrative becomes a collective petition for abolition.

Throughout the 18th century, British abolitionists argued against slavery on the basis that all humans were created in God’s image, and, therefore, people had a “compelling duty to overcome institutions that dehumanize groups of people by treating them as exploitable animals” (Davis 239). Given Britain’s global reputation for being at the forefront of civilization, popular
abolitionist theory stemmed from the question, “how could the world’s most secure, free, religious, just, prosperous and moral nation allow itself to remain the premier perpetrator of the world’s most deadly, brutal, unjust and immoral offences to humanity?” (Drescher 47).

However, despite how slavery challenged prevalent national beliefs, that Britain was a free, just and moral empire, the road to abolishing the slave trade was a long and arduous one. Early on abolitionists recognized that an attack on the system of slavery might not produce the best results, so they focused on the slave trade instead. Abolitionists believed that by ending the trade slave owners would treat their property better and independently move towards emancipation. In 1788, Britain held its “first national petition campaign to end the slave trade” (Davis 235), the first of several which asked the British to treat Africans like humans “rather than as factors of trade and production” (Drescher 50). The abolition campaign in Britain was largely an exercise in the people versus the government, with surprisingly large public support but little government action. In 1793, abolitionists suffered a setback with the outbreak of the war with France, but eventually Parliament outlawed the British Slave Trade in 1807 (Davis 236). Even so, it wasn’t until 1833 that “both Houses of Parliament passed a bill that emancipated nearly eight hundred thousand colonial slaves on August 1, 1834” (238).

Mary Prince’s narrative The History of Mary Prince, A West Indian Slave: Related by Herself was published in 1831, before the emancipation act, but during a time when the humanity of Africans and their right to freedom was seriously being reconsidered. It is logical to conclude that Prince’s narrative played a part in the overall abolitionist discourse, especially given that her editor and employer Thomas Pringle was an abolitionist. Furthermore, the Anti-Slavery Committee worked long and hard on Mary’s behalf to have her master free her so that she could return to her husband in the West Indies. They even went so far as to threaten to bring
her case to the attention of parliament, but all to no avail, as Mr. Wood refused to grant Prince her freedom. Yet, this effort illustrates how invested the Anti-Slavery Committee was in Prince, and therefore the influence they may have had over her or over her narrative. This co-operation is also an example of how slave narratives and abolitionists worked together to end slavery.

On the other hand, the abolition movement in the United States was slightly more complicated due to the pervasive racism, the history of black slavery in the North, as well as the North’s close ties to the South (Davis 254-255). Difficulties also stemmed from Southern hatred for Britain, and a desire to separate themselves from any British association, including emancipation. Nevertheless, the U.S. abolitionists had three fundamental convictions: that all men and women were morally accountable for their actions; that the greatest evil was degrading “the image of God in man” (253); and that the “goal of all reform [was] to free individuals from being manipulated like animals” (253). The Quakers started the movement in the 1780s, and they had a very diverse following, but between the 1780s and the 1830s there was a “lack of continuity” (255) which contrasted with the steady forward motion of Britain’s abolitionist movement. Unlike in Britain, the idea of emancipating slaves in America was intrinsically tied to racial equality. In fact, it was such a controversial issue that from 1836 to 1844 “Congress enforced a ‘gag rule’ against receiving antislavery petitions” (263). It wasn’t until 1865 that America ratified the 13th Amendment, which permanently abolished slavery in all states (322). Frederick Douglass published his *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, an American Slave Written by Himself* in 1845, a full twenty years before slaves were free all across America. At the time of its publication, Douglass had escaped to the North but was still subject to the Fugitive Slave Law. Douglass was an “outstanding black abolitionist... he was employed by several [antislavery] societies and rapidly became one of the best-known orators in the United
States” (Franklin and Moss 182). Later Douglass founded his newspaper, *The North Star*, and so as an active participant in the antislavery movement, he had to be aware of the impact and influence his narrative would have.

To that end there can be little doubt that slave narratives were an effective tool for the abolitionist movement. In its simplest form, the slave narrative is the written account of a slave, often depicting their life and fight for freedom. Part of what makes slave narratives so compelling for white readers are the “episodes of brutal treatment and exciting escapes” (Gara 197). While some slaves did manage to earn or buy their freedom, both Mary Prince and Frederick Douglass essentially wrote their narratives while still under the threat of slavery. Although Prince was officially free the minute she stepped foot in England, her husband and the life she wanted was in the West Indies, where she was still a slave. Similarly, Douglass was a fugitive slave who had escaped to the North. Thus, one could rightly surmise that these two narratives were written with the fear of being returned to the oppression they had so long endured.

Furthermore, both of their accounts were contributed to and published by white abolitionists, which raises the question of authorship and whether or not the stories were groomed for or influenced by the abolitionist movement. Each narrative begins with letters written by established white abolitionists whose word is used to validate the slave tale. In fact, Prince’s narrative is “sandwiched between white and black male-authored texts, as if a black woman’s story is inadequate on its own” (Baumgartner 261). Prince lacked authority in the white patriarchal world of 19th century England, because she was a woman and a slave. As a result, her editor “Pringle inserted numerous testimonies by White Englishmen in the supplement to her *History*” (Todorova 285) as well as footnotes and additional back matter, which included another
slave narrative written by Asa-Asa. In fact, in his preface, Pringle finds it necessary to write that “the narrative was taken down from Mary’s own lips... No fact of importance has been omitted, and not a single circumstance or sentiment has been added. It is essentially her own” (Prince 587). Yet the very fact that he felt the need to assure the public that her narrative is her own subverts her authority, because it adds the implication that her narrative may not have been true. Although it was likely necessary due to the publication of numerous faked narratives, Pringle’s assurances are the attempts of a white male to construct authority for the black female, instead of letting Prince’s work stand for itself. Likewise “the first pages of [Douglass’] Narrative are devoted to guarantees by white sponsors... William Lloyd Garrison and Wendell Phillips” who were “two of abolitionism’s greatest names” (Stone 13), and their testimony to the narratives’ veracity carried weight with the public. Consequently, given that this material is placed at the forefront and back of the work, thus being the first and last thing the reader is exposed to, the front and back matter competes with the narrative for authorial voice. For instance, Douglass’ preface is written by William Lloyd Garrison, and though he talks about Douglass, he does so from a first person point of view, which centers the reader on Garrison. Additionally, he closes his preface with “NO COMPROMISE WITH SLAVERY! NO UNION WITH SLAVEHOLDERS!” (Douglass 276), which moves the reader away from Douglass and focuses them on the abolitionist movement. In the same way, Prince’s authorship is also questioned, not only because her account is bracketed between two male texts, but also because Pringle’s supplementary material is nearly as long as Prince’s narrative, and his explanatory footnotes inundate the text with his voice and assurances. However, given that certain narratives were proven false, the white seal of approval may have been necessary in order to dispel popular scepticism, especially as concerns whether or not slaves could write. One could also argue that
texts written by a race long thought inferior would need white validation to be taken seriously. Yet, given that white authentication seemed necessary, it is curious to note that among his supplementary material, Pringle includes “a slanderous letter from Mr. Wood” (Baumgartner 262) Prince’s owner, which forces the reader to question Prince’s moral character thus subverting the authority of her text. Therefore, since neither Prince nor Douglass could rely completely on their white supporters to properly corroborate their tales, both authors substantiate their work by, for example, amassing “lots of detailed facts in order to establish the evils of slavery and disprove the planters’ claims that slavery was not all that bad” (Todorova 290). For one thing, from the moment he could, Douglass supplied dates, names, and places to cement his narrative in verifiable fact, and he informs the reader that he will do so, “I have now reached a period of my life when I can give dates. I left Baltimore, and went to live with Master Thomas Auld, at St. Michael’s, in March, 1832” (316). Likewise, Prince also opens her narrative with evidentiary support, she writes “I was born at Brackish-Pond, in Bermuda, on a farm belonging to Mr. Charles Myners” (587). Yet Todorova, in relation to Prince, argues that these empirical facts were at the editor’s behest and that they silence “the authentic voice of the West Indian at the same time that it authorizes it” (290). Conversely, one could argue that slaves pushed for factual evidence in order to corroborate their tales and help dispel the animal imagery they had so long been associated with. After all, what animal is aware of the year, the day, or the name of a place? Furthermore, both narratives authenticate themselves with their titles, which end with Written by Himself and Related by Herself. This immediately establishes Douglass and Prince as the primary authors, and no doubt helps to dispel the “attacks in the pro-slavery press on the authenticity of slave narratives” (Stone 12). Therefore, not only do white abolitionists play with the authority of the text, and try to validate it, but the authors themselves work to have their
narratives accepted as fact so that they may serve a larger purpose within the abolitionist movement.

Subsequently, both Douglass and Prince indicate that their narratives were written for the specific purpose of educating the white, slaveholding society they were subject to. When he spoke in England, Douglass said that he exposed slavery “because to expose it is to kill it” (Gara 202) and because describing the process of going from chattel to freedom might move the reader to destroy the institution of slavery. Abolitionists could speak to the horrors of slavery until they were blue in the face, but to have a slave tell the same story was far more effective as they made an abstract idea a reality and “spoke with a unique authority” (Gara 204) that their white counterparts lacked. Prince also speaks directly to her audience about her purpose; she writes that “what my eyes have seen I think it is my duty to relate; for few people in England know what slavery is. I have been a slave – I have felt what a slave feels, and I know what a slave knows; and I would have all the good people in England know it too, that they may break our chains, and set us free” (594) which is a direct plea for the audience to abolish slavery.

Furthermore, through his observations of Mrs. Auld, Douglass acknowledges that the system of slavery is a universal problem that affects blacks and whites, “slavery proved as injurious to her as it did to me. When I went there, she was a pious, warm and tender hearted woman... slavery soon proved its ability to divest her of these heavenly qualities” (306). Therefore, by directly addressing their audience, Prince and Douglass draw the reader in and hand them the responsibility of ending this horrific trade.

At the same time that their narratives address the reader, the quality of writing also becomes its own proof against blacks being substandard human beings. To illustrate, Douglass’s narrative was “a living refutation of the doctrine of racial inferiority” (Gara 201) due to its high
literary composition and language. Beyond the fact that Douglass wrote it, proving he could write and therefore learn, the language he uses is of an elegant and literary level. For example he writes, “the mere recurrence to those songs, even now, afflicts me; and while I am writing these lines, an expression of feeling has already found its way down my cheek. To those songs I trace my first glimmering conception of the dehumanizing character of slavery” (290), which demonstrates his command of the English language. Douglass also takes care to relate how he learned to read and write, indicating how important he found that education. Moreover, as an agent for the abolitionist movement, Douglass was supremely effective as an orator due to his bearing and speech, “on one occasion, after Douglass had electrified an audience with his remarkable eloquence, Garrison rose to his feet and flung out the question, “Is this a man or a thing?” (Franklin and Moss 181), and it is that question which each narrative poses by virtue of its existence and its expressiveness. Prince’s work functions in a similar manner, but she uses emotions “to combat the image of the slave as brute beast” (Baumgartner 255), such as when she describes her pain and sorrow at being sold away from her family, “my heart throbbed with grief and terror so violently, that I pressed my hands quite tightly across my breast, but I could not keep it still, and it continued to leap as though it would burst out of my body” (589). This is a demonstration of the range of human emotion she, the slave, is capable of, an emotion unrecognized by her masters. Therefore, their command of the English language, their ability to express thought and feeling, is a strong refutation against prevalent ideas of African inferiority.

In turn, it is interesting to note that while Prince and Douglass speak to the abuses they suffered, neither talk about the physical pain they endured. When Prince describes one of her numerous whippings, she does so in a manner that separates herself from the experience, “to strip me naked – to hang me up by the wrists and lay my flesh open with cow-skin, was an
ordinary punishment for even a light offence” (591) yet she does not talk about her physical pain; there is not a single mention of how much it hurts. Douglass does the same when in reference to Mr. Covey he writes that he “tore off my clothes, and lashed me till he had worn out his switches, cutting me so savagely as to leave the marks visible for a long time after” (322). While this certainly speaks to the savagery of Mr. Covey’s beatings, it does not talk about the physical pain. This seems like a glaring omission considering the desire both Prince and Douglass had to abolish slavery. Yet perhaps it is also a form of self-preservation or a way of asserting their individual rights to silence. Freedom not only gave them the right to speak out against slavery, but it also afforded them the power to decide what they didn’t want to divulge. Their silence was a mark of their freedom.

Finally, Douglass is also very aware that slavery is lawful and consistently speaks to how African Americans had no rights within the court system, that they couldn’t even bear witness against a white man, no matter the wrong committed, “if I had been killed in the presence of a thousand colored people, their testimony combined would have been insufficient to have arrested one of the murderers” (Douglass 348). Slaves were voiceless in life and law. However, given the words Douglass chooses like, “the facts in the case were these” (346) or “think the cases I have cited sufficient” (334) and the repeat of similar terms, he is in fact bearing witness. He is testifying against white society through his narrative as he was never allowed to do in life. Additionally, he also bears witness on behalf of other slaves, like his description of Mr. Covey purchasing the female slave, Caroline, “for a breeder” (324) or witnessing his aunts whipping, or Demby’s murder. All these and more Douglass bears witness to, transforming in part, his personal narrative into a collective story. Prince does the same by speaking of Hetty in the house of Captain I— “her death was hastened... by the dreadful chastisement she received from my
master during her pregnancy. It happened as follows” (591). Her narrative also shifts from “I” to “we” when she’s with Mr. D—. Thus both Douglass and Prince go beyond the personal narrative and move towards sharing the collective slave experience as a testimony that their stories were not unique, they were everyday.

In closing, slavery as an institution has yet to be completely destroyed throughout the world. Mary Prince and Frederick Douglass are but two voices among millions. But each played their role in abolishing slavery in England and the United States. Their narratives were eye witness accounts of a life of horror few believed real. They shared their experiences in the hopes of freeing their people. Their stories played numerous roles, from teacher to witness to living refutation of false beliefs, all in order to destroy the institution of slavery. But no matter what they did, or how they did it, the very act of writing and publishing their life stories disproves every commonly held belief of black inferiority. The true, quantifiable proof of the impact their narratives had may never be known. But that they had an impact, that they played a part in abolition cannot be doubted. No one can tell the truth of an experience the way one who lived it can, and that is the power Prince and Douglass held and wielded so effectively.
Works Cited


