

Spatial Resistance and Status Transformation in Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass

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Abstract: This paper examines Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass from a spatial perspective. It aims to explore the author's construction of a written self in terms of spatial resistance in order to help readers understand the role space plays in the transformation from object into subject. By examining the disciplined space under slavery, it argues that Douglass presents the disciplined space under slavery as a metaphor for slaves' status as objects. Modelled after Benjamin Franklin's autobiography, Douglass's Narrative creates a written self whose transformation from object to subject is realized and granted in the public space. Although the former slave finally obtains freedom in the Northern free space, he has yet to fight for an equal space.

1. Introduction

Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass (hereafter referred to as Narrative) is generally considered the prototype for American slave narratives, and it is also believed to represent the beginning of African American autobiographical writing. This narrative documents Douglass's early life as a slave, his acquisition of literacy, his fight with slave breaker Mr Covey and the hard-won freedom. A lot of the literary criticism of African American slave narratives has focused on the importance of literacy, the genre of autobiography, the authors' control over the text as well as the relationship to the reading audience. In discussing slave narratives as autobiographies, James Olney, a recognized scholar of autobiography, distinguishes between a writing self and a written self (Olney, 55). Within Douglass's autobiographical narrative that I shall examine, the writing self (the author) recreates a written self that expresses his deepest sentiments about the horrors of slavery and the meaning of freedom.

2. Representing Self in a Historical and Cultural Space

In his preface for Douglass's 1845 Narrative, Houston Baker stresses the need for readers to consider the "literary-historical conditions of the narrative's origins" as well as "socio-historical milieu" from which the narrative comes (xi). In an autobiography, the depicted self is constantly evolving so that it can transform into a new self that is different from the former one.

2.1 Individualism and the Public Sphere

The period of American Renaissance between the 1830s and the Civil War witnessed a tremendous development of the American autobiography genre. There was an explosion of

published autobiographies, among which, the great early American autobiographies, like Franklin's and Thomas Shepard's, were widely read and highly valued. After the Civil War, black Americans entered history in the sense that they documented their life experiences into the American history. Autobiography, as a means of cultural expression, is widely used by former slaves to recount their experiences under slavery. Andrews asserts that from the nineteenth century up to the twentieth, "autobiographies of former slaves dominated the Afro-American narrative tradition" (Andrews, 78). Frederick Douglass's 1845 *Narrative*, written both as antislavery propaganda and as personal revelation, is regarded as the most famous one.

Frederick Douglass (1818-1895), the son of a slave woman, and later a fugitive slave, was regarded as a representative black American leader of the 19th century. In 1838, the twenty-year old Douglass escaped from slavery and then settled in the North. He soon found himself deeply involved in the abolitionist movement. In the year of 1844, he began to write his autobiography, entitled *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, an American Slave*, and then published it in the spring of 1845.

Considering the cultural background of the nineteenth century, Andrews believes Douglass's *Narrative* in a way contributes to "the literature of romantic individualism and anti-institutionalism" (Andrews, 78).

In American culture, the ideologies of individualism and heroism are demonstrated in the construction of the "self-made man," an identity a lot of male ex-slaves like Douglass strive for in their writing. No wonder Douglass famously stated in his *Narrative*, "You have seen how a man was made a slave, you shall see how a slave was made a man" (Douglass, *Narrative* 294).

Franklinian model of autobiography is commonly accepted as the most popular one, and Douglass evidently adopts some of the conventions. Just like Franklin, Douglass too starts from scratch, act against the unfair system by tapping into his intellectual capacities, and then through hard work becomes both successful and famous. In his narrative, Douglass creates a written self who develops from the lowest origin to the most desired freedom. Such a transformation shares the traits of the Franklinian model, as they both strive for self-education, assiduity and diligence.

In fact, critics have noticed the way Douglass consciously follows the example of Franklin in the construction of a self-made man, a powerful trope in the nineteenth century. Rafia Zafar believes that Douglass readily "adopted the role of the self-made American man" (Zafar, 99, 101-02). This idea is shared by Valerie Smith who argues that, Douglass in his narrative highlighted the concept of masculinity (Smith, 34). However, considering the danger of following the conventional structure, Houston Baker argues that by consciously following the literary conventions like the Franklinian model, Douglass's *Narrative* "is perhaps never again the authentic voice of black American slavery" (Baker, *The Journey Back* 43). Although this kind of modelling gives the former slaves a limited freedom to represent their stories, this is the only way available for them to get their voices heard by the white middle class.

Usually, the quality of masculinity is demonstrated by the ability to access the public space, an assertion by Deborah McDowell, who states that by focusing on the public space, a symbol of the accomplishment of the grown-up man in Western culture, "autobiography reflects and constructs that culture's definitions of masculinity" (McDowell 198). During his enslavement, Douglass himself spent most of his time in the plantation fields or labouring out in the city of Baltimore. Seen in this light, it is easy to understand why Douglass, in his narrative, mainly focuses on the public sphere. As a man, he must construct a written self who is able to move into public spaces and establish himself in the public sphere. At the end of the *Narrative* Douglass describes his participation in an anti-slavery convention. His ability to take part in the public sphere--an ability signalled by his occupation of the speaker's platform in a public space--is the ultimate sign that he has been recognized as a subject, rather than an object. Even as he writes the *Narrative*, Douglass knows that "free" space he occupies is only nominally free. The spaces the African Americans are

forced to occupy in the North, much like the spaces in the South, indicate their inferior social status, a status confirmed by the restrictions which virtually exclude them from the public sphere.

2.2 Slave as Object: The Disciplined Space under Slavery

Space is one medium slaveowners utilize to indicate their ownership and superiority. In Douglass's narrative, Colonel Lloyd's Garden becomes another metaphor of white power and dominance, and the showcase of slaves' status as objects. As Douglass describes, the fruits in the garden are a great temptation for the slaves. In order to keep the slaves from stealing these fruits, the colonel devises various strategies, the most successful of which is to tar the fence all around and if any slave is found to have tar upon himself, then he will be punished with severe whipping. Houston Baker suggests that the mark of the tar can be read as an economic sign: "Blacks, through the genetic touch of the tar brush that makes them people of colour, are automatically guilty of the paradoxically labelled 'crime' of seeking to enjoy the fruits of their own labour" (Baker, *Blues* 46). The slaves cannot enjoy the fruits of their labour because they too are a means of production, possessions which are owned as land is owned. As non-subjects, they are thus barred from this "free" space, which is accessible only to the master class.

Not only are slaves prohibited from entering the space which is for the free master class, they are also forcibly confined to certain space by a combination of surveillance and violence. In *Narrative*, Douglass tells the murder of a slave named Demby by the overseer Gore, because this slave "ran and plunged himself into a creek... refusing to come out" (268). Another unnamed slave shares Demby's fate when he is shot by Colonel Lloyd's neighbour, Mr Bondley, for trespassing while in search of oysters. It is the act of trespassing, of seeking to move beyond the set spatial boundary that leads to the punishment of the trespasser. Any attempts to trespass must be punished because the boundaries between slave and free, between subject and non-subject are always on the verge of breaking down.

As white men and autonomous subjects, Bondley and Gore have the power to survey spatial boundaries. In fact, Gore's function as an overseer is to conduct surveillance to patrol the spatial borders between freedom and bondage. The shootings of Demby and the unnamed oysterman are what geographer Edward Soja would call a "process of reinforcement". Straying beyond the confined space displays autonomy which a slave, an object, a non-subject, is not allowed to possess. Gore's justification for his actions is that if Demby goes unpunished, it will result in "the freedom of the slaves, and the enslavement of the whites" (269). It is safe to say that white freedom and subjectivity can only be preserved if African Americans remain enslaved non-subjects.

3. Fight for Free Space and Pursuit of Public Recognition

In *Narrative*, the author Douglass constructs a written self "Frederick", who by exploiting the public space under slavery, fulfils his freedom in the North, and thus transforms into a subject. The acquisition of literacy in the Aulds' house makes Frederick realize his status as an object and ignites his desire for free space. Banned from learning in his master's domestic space, Frederick then appropriates the public space to gain knowledge. In defiance of the spatial discipline, he fights with Mr Covey, the slave breaker, and thus asserts his manhood. Later, by choosing his own employer to sell his labour in the public space of Baltimore, he manages to evade the surveillance from his master and escapes to the Northern free space. By establishing a domestic space of his own and being recognized in the public space, Frederick finally transforms from an object to a subject.

3.1 Literacy and the Realization of Objecthood in Hugh Auld's House

As is found in many other slave narratives, Douglass not only records Frederick's physical transformation from slavery to freedom but also his intellectual development from illiteracy to literacy. The latter transition seems to be one of the most important experiences in Frederick's life as when he comprehends the necessity to be literate, he realizes what it means to be human.

Young Frederick was about eight years old when he entered the Aulds' house for the first time. Douglass makes it clear that, although the young Frederick is in domestic space, he does not belong to it. The moment Hugh Auld finds out that his wife has been instructing young Frederick to read, he forbids it, and warns her of the danger that will definitely come with it, as he believes, Douglass, once literate, "would at once become unmanageable, and of no value to his master" (274). Mr Auld's instructions to his wife are necessary, for the kind Mrs. Auld was too civilized to treat Douglass as a brute and couldn't bear to keep him in mental darkness. Like Frederick, Sophia Auld, as a woman in the nineteenth century, is also oppressed. Patriarchal authority ensures that there must be no alliance between slave and mistress.

Douglass's description of his enforced illiteracy to "shut [him] up in mental darkness" demonstrates Hugh Auld's effort to maintain the young Frederick's otherness. Douglass's duties in the Aulds, which include errand running and the care of two-year-old Thomas negate any sharp spatial demarcation. Thus, the re-enforcement of the young Frederick's otherness must be maintained mentally. If slaves are prohibited from education, they will remain slaves forever and never recognize their non-subject status. The restriction is also a way to manage the slave's access to physical space: Mr Auld knew that with reading comes geographical knowledge and knowledge of the possibility of escape. Notably, Mr Auld's use of proverbs is also spatial: "If you give a nigger an inch, he will take an ell" (274).

Although a slave for more than eight years, Frederick fails to figure out the state of his existence until the words are directed to him. He suddenly realizes that he has been nothing other than a slave for all those past years, and it never occurs to him, that literacy could exert such huge influence on one's mind. "From that moment, I understood the pathway from slavery to freedom" (275).

Such a realization echoes what Gates argues, that is, the role of literacy in distinguishing man from animal, "slave from citizen, object from subject" (Gates, 25). Thus enlightened, young Frederick embarks on the journey of defying the spatial definition of his status as an object.

When young Frederick learns that exclusion from the world of written language is the means by which his inferior status is maintained, he does something which is particularly important: he seeks further instruction, not within domestic space but outside, in the public space in the city of Baltimore. While running errands for his master, Frederick manages to turn the privilege his master to his advantage. It occurs to him that the fresh bread is always available in his master's house, Frederick offers bread for the children along his route in exchange for daily lessons from them. The reason why Frederick can find such companionship on the streets of Baltimore is that those public byways are not strictly demarcated. Actually, these spaces are mixed with free and enslaved blacks as well as working class whites. The young Frederick is able to do this precisely because he manages to evade surveillance.

In the *Narrative*, Douglass constantly projects a written self that is thought to be ruined by slavery, and therefore needs to be educated and freed from this evil system. With literacy comes his desire for freedom, as "the silver trump of freedom had aroused [his] soul to eternal wakefulness. Freedom now appeared, to disappear no more forever" (279). With the greater knowledge of space, he is able to survey, to judge and evaluate the space he inhabits and begins to consider the possibility of free space, which is an unthinkable act for a slave. However, it is also because of his acquisition of literacy, Frederick now understands more about the meaning of being a slave---the equating of human life with animals. As Douglass says in the narrative, "The more I read the more I

was led to abhor and detest my enslavers. I could regard them in no other light than a band of successful robbers who had left their homes, and gone to Africa, and stolen us from our homes, and in a strange land reduced us to slavery” (279).

3.2 Spatial Resistance in Mr Covey’s Plantation AND BALTIMORE

Through education, the passions for freedom in his soul has been ignited. However, the subsequent experiences at Mr. Covey’s turn those passions into complete ashes. “I was somewhat unmanageable when I first went there” Douglass admits, “but a few months of this discipline tamed me. Mr. Covey succeeded in breaking me. I was broken in body, soul, and spirit... and behold a man transformed into a brute!” (293) Discouraged and dejected, Frederick sinks into the life of a field labourer. When he is set to farm work for the first time, Frederick’s inexperienced mismanagement of a team of oxen results in a savage beating. This constant threat of violence is strengthened by a ruthless surveillance, especially from Mr Covey, who seems to be ever present even without actually being there. Describing Mr Covey’s ability to survey the slaves, Douglass writes,

Such was his cunning, that we used to call him, among ourselves, “the snake” ... His comings were like a thief in the night. He was under every tree, behind every stump, in every bush, and at every window, on the plantation (291).

Covey’s omnipresence suggests that a fundamental part of his “nigger breaking” operation is constant surveillance. Indeed, Douglass’s accounts of Gore and the other overseers on the Lloyd plantation indicate that this kind of surveying is key to the maintenance of spatial boundaries under slavery.

Having realized his status as object through literacy, it is impossible for Frederick to remain so. A turning point comes for Frederick after six months with Covey. After an especially brutal beating, Frederick hides in woods before unsuccessfully seeking his owner’s help. Seeing no alternative, he returns and is attacked by Covey, but on this occasion, he resolves to fight. Douglass writes,

I seized Covey hard by the throat; and as I did so, I rose. He held on to me, and I to him. ... I held him uneasy, causing the blood to run where I touched him with the ends of my fingers. ... This battle with Mr. Covey was the turning–point in my career as a slave. ... I felt as I never felt before. It was a glorious resurrection, from the tomb of slavery, to the heaven of freedom (247).

Here, Douglass constructs a written self who ventures to defy the slave breaker’s spatial discipline and who dares to feel like a man. Not until the year 1838 does Frederick escape the slavery. Seen in this light, this declaration of freedom is in essence, more of a spiritual freedom. What this narrative aims to emphasize is that, freedom of mind and spirit is more meaningful than the physical freedom, the actual escape from the South to the North. From now on, it is more appropriate to say that he is more enslaved in body than in soul, and it wouldn’t be long before he takes action to seek for true freedom.

When Thomas Auld rents Frederick’s services to a new master, his desire to obtain the privileged free space, where he will be recognized as a subject, causes him to act. He soon gets to know the route from his destination to Baltimore, and discovers the direction of a ferry off to Philadelphia, all of which give him hope of contriving a plan for escape. On his way south from Baltimore to St. Michael’s, Frederick pays special attention to the direction of the steam boats to Philadelphia. And manages to perceive an opportunity for his escapement. However, before they set out, the plan is betrayed and Frederick, as the ringleader is sent back to Baltimore.

Once in Baltimore, Frederick takes the relative spatial freedom in the city to his own advantage. After a year of apprenticeship in Gardner’s shipyard, Frederick could, by his own account, command “from six to seven dollars per week” (314). With profit comes the risk that Frederick can evade the disciplinary gaze to which the rural space such as Covey’s farm is subjected since there is

to be no overseers in the byways and public spaces of antebellum Baltimore. After a conflict between Frederick and other four white apprentices, Hugh Auld reluctantly agrees to allow Frederick to “hire [his] time,” an agreement which includes “the following terms: I was to be allowed all my time, make all contracts with those for whom I worked, and find my own employment, and, in return for this liberty, I was to pay him [Hugh Auld] three dollars at the end of each week, find myself in caulking tools, and in board and clothing” (317).

The relatively spatial freedom for Frederick to hire his own time gradually becomes a concern of his master who worries that with that Frederick might escape. Having made arrangements to attend a camp meeting ten miles away, Frederick, “detained by [his] employer,” finds that prompt Saturday night payment of his wages to Hugh Auld would require him to relinquish his outing. However, he decides to go the camp meeting. Mr Auld is shocked and questions Frederick for his motive, upon which, Frederick replies that he doesn’t know he is required to seek permission from Mr Auld about his outing.

This response troubles Auld, who takes back Frederick’s privileges, declaring that he would not hire Frederick by time and there will be no choice for Frederick to make. Auld, of course, is worried that such privileges would lead to the running away of Frederick. So, he ordered Frederick to bring his tools and clothing home right away. Although he complies with his master’s orders, Frederick spends the next week in idleness. Then Auld threatens to find Frederick a job, an action which would once subject Frederick to a relay of disciplinary gazes over which he would have no control. To avoid this, Frederick goes out and find an employment from Mr. Butler, to work in the shipyard near the drawbridge, forcing Auld to give up the idea of seeking a job for Frederick. To allay Auld’s suspicions, he promptly turns all of his wages over to his master. Three weeks later Frederick runs away.

3.3 Construction of Domestic Space and Participation in Public Space

In his narrative, Douglass downplays the importance of a homeplace and views the access to and participation in public space as the way for a former slave like Frederick to be fully recognized as a subject.

On September 3, 1838, having taken the name of Frederick Johnson---a process of renaming which serves to indicate the change in status, Frederick arrives in New York. The *Narrative* does not include the details of this escape as Douglass believes that such revelations would inevitably block the escape routes for other runaways. So in his narrative, the method, the route and the means of his escapement all remain a mystery. Dressed as a sailor, Frederick boards a northbound train and carrying the papers of a free seaman, and reaches New York safely.

It is only when Frederick arrives at the Northern free space that he can officially claim for himself the position of subject. With the position of a freeman comes the right to establish the “natural” domestic space. Frederick makes it clear that he does this almost immediately. His wife to be, Anna, comes soon afterwards, in spite of the fact that he is now without a home or a house, and is in a helpless condition. The two are married on September 15, 1838, less than two weeks after Frederick’s departure from Baltimore.

Douglass’s comparative reticence about the existence of his fiancée is puzzling. However, Douglass’s biographer William McFeely explains that this reticence is understandable when one considers the mores of both Douglass’s audience and Douglass himself. “[S]o ingrained was the [Victorian] assumption that women were the vessels of male lust that men’s affectionate relationships with women other than relatives were not talked about publicly in polite society, except in the most general terms. Any richer discussion would have led immediately to the assumption that the friendship had not been chaste” (McFeely 66). Thus, Anna Murray Douglass becomes only a representative sign of her husband’s newly achieved subjecthood. Five years

Douglass's senior, Anna was a free black woman and a domestic servant whose wages probably financed his escape from Baltimore. Nonetheless, Douglass cannot take the risk of documenting any details surrounding Anna's struggle to be publicly recognized as a subject. To do so would mean to question her chastity, since he has already made it clear that black women generally suffered from sexual exploitation from their masters. To question this would threaten Douglass's newly acquired subject position. As a freeman, Douglass obtained a publicly recognized subjecthood, which allowed him to legally protect and maintain the domestic space in which his wife belongs.

In fact, Douglass primarily links the recognition of Frederick's subjecthood to both the official recognition of his position as the head of his household and more importantly, to the ability to step onto the stage of a public meeting house and participate in the public sphere. It is not surprising that the homeplace has been suppressed in his *Narrative*. Indeed, in *Narrative*, the author only mentions Frederick's homeplace in a single sentence, which basically states that his home is somewhere on the outskirts of the plantation, where he lives with his grandmother. The narrative ends, not with the description of Frederick's domesticity, but with his first impromptu speech, delivered at an anti-slavery convention in Nantucket. "I felt strongly moved to speak, and was at the same time much urged to do so by Mr. William C. Coffin, a gentleman who had heard me speak in the coloured people's meeting at New Bedford...I spoke but a few moments, when I felt a degree of freedom, and said what I desired with considerable ease" (326). The speech, which proves to be the beginning of Frederick's oratorical career, is also a final triumphant indication of his acquisition of subjecthood. In the slave-holding southern space, a chattel does not have the power to address a public meeting. However, at Nantucket, Frederick is finally able to physically occupy the space accorded to those in possession of fully recognized subjecthood---the public platform. However, this triumphal entry into the public space proves to be a continuing struggle in his second autobiography---*My Bondage and My Freedom*, which documents the author's effort to seek the public recognition accorded to his white counterparts outside of the domestic space. Recognition of his subjecthood, therefore, does not only include the recognition of his right to form a household of his own, it also includes the right to leave the domestic sphere for the public one, an action synonymous with manhood.

4. Conclusion

The concept of "space" is decidedly crucial to African Americans, since from the slave trade period, the human cargo has been confined to a certain space that defines them as objects. On the Atlantic crossing, the space allotted to each slave, as Williams observes, is only five and a half feet in length and sixteen inches in breadth (Williams 35). Frederick Douglass, sensitive of the spatial metaphors, infuses in them historical meanings and social implications. The inter-relatedness between space and status is central to his slave narrative, in which the spaces serve not only as geographic settings, backgrounds, the sites triggering the story-telling or literal boundaries, but as active and dynamic agents echoing the transformation of a written self from object into subject. Modelled after Benjamin Franklin's autobiography, Douglass's *Narrative* creates a written self who after an individualistic battle for free space, aspires to access the public space.

In spite of the Emancipation Proclamation, boundaries between blacks and whites remain fixed. Although slavery is ostensibly gone, African Americans are still confined to marginal spaces and largely excluded from the public sphere. By recording his perceptions of the spatial limitations, and his struggles to achieve the liberating possibility of free space, Douglass provides us with an inkling of how African Americans would later deal with the problem of the colour line. Like many other slave narrators and the black writers after him, his trek from object to subject is a story about space and freedom.

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