

Unfreedom and the Crises of Witnessing

A Republican Perspective on the African American Slave Narratives

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At the end of his famous *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, An American Slave* (1845), Douglass writes about his first participation at an Abolitionist convention, in Nantucket four years after his flight from slavery in Maryland, where he was invited to tell about his former life in slavery:

“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 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.” (Douglass, 1845, p. 117)

However brief and impersonal, the address marks a decisive moment in the symbolic transformation of the author from slave to citizen as he enters a political arena for the first time. This transformation is symbolic in at least two senses, one strong and one weak. In the strong sense, the Nantucket address marks the beginning of Douglass’s life-long career as a political speaker and writer that made him famous as “The Representative Negro” in America and Britain. However, his transformation is also symbolic in the weak sense that it was neither effective nor binding from its beginning. In the 1840s the legal status of runaway slaves like Douglass was complicated and quite uncertain, and further aggravated by the Fugitive Slave Act of 1850 which stipulated that fugitive slaves residing in the North were still the property of their owners who could legally

restore them to slavery. As a consequence, Douglass was forced to flee to Britain, having become vulnerable in his position as a person of public renown.

In yet another sense, we can also interpret the situation of his witnessing, the act through which his civic transformation is performed, as symbolic in so far as it represents a certain conflict within the act of witnessing. By referring to his act of witnessing as “a severe cross,” Douglass symbolically addresses a constraint within the testimonial situation that has been the subject of much critical attention in studies of witness literature. It consists in the witness’s expectation or experience of estrangement towards his audience due to the content of his testimony. While Douglass apparently did not feel any inhibitions when he told his story to other blacks in the Massachusetts city of New Bedford, who were familiar with the experience of slavery, he instantly feels reduced again to the status of a slave at the prospect of a white audience on Nantucket, until his words finally restore him to “a degree of freedom.” This chapter will investigate the act of witnessing in the antebellum slave narratives as an attempt to transcend the condition of unfreedom, and reach for a freedom that can be asserted only gradually, in the process of speaking.

The Antebellum slave narratives constitute a body of literature centrally concerned with the problems of unfreedom. First of all, they portray the deprivations of American slaves from an autobiographical point of view. Second, the narratives were written and published with the explicit purpose of bringing an end to American slavery. Third, many of the slave narratives were authored by men and women who had escaped enslavement in the South but were not legally free and, therefore, remained dependent on the patronage and protection of white abolitionists for publication. It is thus a body of literature which struggles to affirm the witness as a free person who is fit to invest his or her testimony in political agency. These factors can, I think, explain some of the peculiarities of the slave narratives in comparison to other testimonial or autobiographical literature.

The slave narratives’ struggle with unfreedom as a political and personal condition is also decisive for their literary status today, which is a mixed one. On the one hand, the slave narratives are now recognized as not only important documents in a decisive chapter in American history,¹ but also as the beginning of Afro-American literature. For these reasons, slave autobiography has become an integrated part of the American canon and is taught in most American schools.

1 In a wider perspective, abolitionist literature of the 18th and 19th century, to which the slave narratives contributes substantially, is responsible for changing the Western opinion on slavery, from accepting it as an unquestioned fact of life to considering it to be a violation of natural law (Davis, 2006, p. 331).

On the other hand, slave narratives have not benefitted much from the current critical prominence of witness literature, as they do not conform very well to the dominant critical demands of that genre. Contemporary discussions of witness literature have concentrated on testimony from the great political catastrophes of the 20th century, in particular the Holocaust, and reflect the so-called end of ideology following the end of the Cold War. “The witness produces no theory, teaches no doctrine, does not attempt to convince one of his own world view” writes Renaud Dulong in his book *Le témoin oculaire*, and his view is repeated by Horace Engdahl, former secretary of the Swedish Academy, who, in a speech on witness literature delivered at the centennial of the Noble Prize, declared that: “the persona of witness literature demands a certain loneliness or at least a withdrawal from ideological struggle” (Engdahl, 2002, p. 8).

These criteria for witness literature are certainly not met by antebellum slave narrators who are quite explicit in their ideological struggle against slavery. Though slave testimonies essentially rely upon authenticity and truthfulness, they only rarely appear as self-authenticating publications. Instead, their veracity usually depends on prefatory statements from prominent representatives of the abolitionist movement. It is therefore quite obvious that many of the narratives had been filtered and conformed to a political purpose and must be regarded with a certain suspicion. It is an indication of the difficulties faced by slave narratives in living up to contemporary criteria of witness literature that Toni Morrison, the most critically acclaimed contemporary writer directly engaged with slave narrative, in her famous novel *Beloved* draws on the experience of a historical refugee slave whose testimony was not and could never have been represented in the accepted slave narratives. The resistance to representation that follows traumatic experience is, in fact, a major theme in Morrison’s novel and her ongoing engagement with the history of American slavery.

The historical veracity of the slave narratives is of course to a certain degree destabilized by their political purpose, and for this reason the quality of the narratives as source material for the study of American slavery has been the subject of much discussion, though most historians now accept the overall validity of the narratives. However, instead of reading the slave narratives for particular historical or literary reasons, as documentation of a decisive chapter in American history and African American literary history, they deserve to be read in a wider perspective as demonstrations of what it means to be unfree and what it takes to assert oneself as a free person, in other words: as a touchstone for the conceptualization of political freedom and its opposite. I will therefore suggest a reading of slave narratives which introduces republican political thinking on freedom as an alternative perspective for the “crises of witnessing” than those offered by

psychoanalysis and trauma studies (for instance Felman & Laub, 1992; Caruth, 1996). In particular, I will draw on Phillip Pettit's republican theory of freedom, which stresses the importance of discursive control to the definition of personal freedom. As I will argue, the crises of witnessing in slave narratives are essentially connected to questions of discursive control, a fact which has hitherto been insufficiently conceptualized by scholarship.

SLAVERY, LITERACY, AND DISCURSIVE CONTROL

The philosophical concepts I will use in this essay are taken from Pettit's book *A Theory of Freedom. From the Psychology to the Politics of Agency* (2001), which adds a social dimension to his more famous republican definition of political freedom as non-domination.² As such, his analysis of freedom as discursive control aims to demonstrate that freedom requires more than the mere absence of interference that liberal political theorists assume. Central to Pettit's idea of freedom is the ability of agents to be held responsible for their actions. An action will be free in itself, Pettit argues, if it is underdetermined and thus materializes in a way that allows an agent to be held responsible. This agent can then be held responsible as a free self to the extent that his constitution allows him or her to choose in such a way so as to be fully responsible for the action (Pettit, 2001, p. 21). Yet the agent will only be a free person, Pettit holds, to the extent that their position in relation to other people allows them to choose in such a way that they are fully responsible for what they do. Personal freedom, in other words, requires not only that we are fit to be held responsible, but that others acknowledge us as fit to be held responsible for our actions.

This acknowledgment is naturally practiced through discourse, for agents can only be free persons insofar as they have the ability to discourse and access to discourse (Pettit, 2001, p. 70). In order to count as a free person, therefore, we must acquire discursive control through discourse-friendly relationships. Pettit's

2 Pettit's argument that republicanism involves a concept of negative liberty (i.e. non-domination), which is essentially different from that of liberalism, which conceives of freedom as non-interference (Pettit, 1993a, 1993b, 1997), was inspired by Skinner (cf. Skinner, 1984 and 1986) who has added substantially to the historical understanding of polemic differences between republicanism and liberalism (see also Skinner, 1998). Though the current essay is much indebted to Skinner's historical approach, I will focus here on Pettit whose conceptual framework of republican thought allows for a social perspective that is absent in the works of Skinner.

insistence on the importance of personal freedom through discourse control is leveled against philosophical theories that define freedom as only rational or volitional control. A stoic philosopher like Epictetus, allegedly a manumitted slave himself, would argue that freedom of the self depends only on the agent's rational and volitional capacity, not on his relationship to other people. A stoic slave can, in principle, conceive of himself as a free self by alienating himself from the world of men. Accordingly, a rational choice theorist will hold that a person who is threatened by a robber to choose between giving his money or his life is a free agent in so far as he is faced with a rational choice between his money and his life. While the slave and the victim of a robbery may be regarded as free agents in the sense that they can choose rationally, and the stoic slave may even count as a free self, insofar as he exerts rational control over his own volitions, neither can be acknowledged as free as long as they are deprived of discursive control.

Lack of discursive control is a problem familiar to all American slave narrators. Along with the oblique descriptions of physical coercion such as flogging and beating in the narratives, we find numerous accounts of ways that slaves were deprived of discursive control and thus denied even the most basic forms of individual personhood. A very important feature of American slavery, which almost all slave narrators discuss, concerns the systematic attempt to prevent slaves from learning to write. Since colonial times laws prohibited teaching slaves in Georgia and South Carolina how to write, and after the Nat Turner uprising in 1831 further legislation arose in many slave states to prevent slaves from gathering, travelling, and educating themselves (Genovese, 1974, p. 562). Without the refinement of such formal education, most slaves relied upon the assistance of white editors or ghost writers to produce their narratives. Though editors of antebellum narratives were eager to suppress any imaginative elements in the slave narratives in order to present slavery as authentically as possible, it is quite clear that the narratives' amanuenses and publishers were not always the transparent documentarians they claimed to be. Tendencies to grandiloquence and sentimental description of slaves' rustic plantation life are thus found in many narratives produced from oral statements, whereas they are absent from the autobiographies that were written by literate slave witnesses (Olney, 1984).

The prospect of achieving discursive control was considerably better for slave fugitives who managed to learn to write. Among these, none is more aware of the importance of literacy to emancipation than Douglass. In his narrative, he describes how his mistress taught him to read when he was a child, while his master taught him the consequences of literacy by reproving his wife for having spoiled a slave by teaching him the ABCs ("It would forever unfit him to be a slave", Douglass quotes his master). Concluding in a manner characteristic of his

dialectical thinking, Douglass therefore acknowledges, “In learning to read, I owe almost as much to the bitter opposition of my master, as to the kindly aid of my mistress” (Douglass, 1845, p. 33). Though Douglass conceives of literacy as a requirement for freedom more clearly than any other slave narrator, his view is echoed by several less eloquent writers, many of whom acquired literacy only after their escape to the North, and his insight is endorsed by most contemporary scholars. “Sheer literacy was the very commodity that separated animal from human being, slave from citizen, object from subject”, observes Henry Louis Gates, Jr. (Gates 1987, p. 24-25), while Olney stresses that literacy, identity and freedom are “altogether interdependent and indistinguishable as thematic strands” in the slave narratives (Olney, 1984, p. 53-54).³

In a comparative historical perspective it is interesting to see that literacy has been invested with far more importance for the struggle against American slavery than in previous historical periods. Contrary to Douglass’s and his former owners’ views on literate slaves, educated slaves were thus seen as valuable resources in the ancient Greek and Roman slave economies and not as threats to society. However, it was much easier to physically exclude slaves from the public sphere in an assembly democracy like classical Athens than it was to prevent slaves from political interference in a 19th century public sphere of printed discourse.⁴

We have seen that literacy and discourse-friendly relations to others were recognized as primary objectives for the enjoyment of personal freedom by the slave narrators. The dependence of many slave narrators on amanuenses and

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- 3 The insistence on the importance of discursive independence, found both among slave narrators and contemporary historians, points to a distinction of discursive control, which Pettit ignores. According to his theory, the only real violation of discursive freedom consists in unfriendly coercion, and so Pettit grants that discursive control depends on discourse friendly relationship. In this respect the relationship between the illiterate slave narrators and their amanuenses can only be characterized as discourse friendly, in the sense that it depended on mutual agreement. However, we must acknowledge that illiterate narrators were not as free as the independent autobiographers to control their own discourse. Perhaps discursive independence is not a necessary requirement for discursive control, but it is certainly valuable to it.
 - 4 It must be added that abolitionists and slave narrators have a tendency that has persisted to this day, to overemphasize the restrictions on slave education, which were not practiced in all slave states. Since freedom of speech was in no way as advanced as in the North, the association of literacy and emancipation was never universal in the South (cf. Webber, 1980).

editors was biased in many cases (Olney, 1984), but should on the other hand not be seen as something compromising their status as testimony. Though the tone and style of the narratives were often manipulated or distorted by editors and amanuenses (who rarely wanted the narratives to be as “unvarnished” as they pretended), historians of American slavery accept today that the factual statements of the narratives are relatively truthful, and it has been recognized that the editors often went at length to authenticate the veracity of the narratives (Blassingame, 1977).

RESPONSIBILITY AND AUTOBIOGRAPHY

As we have seen, Pettit argues that our capacity to exercise discourse control is dependent on discourse-friendly relations to other people. However, discourse control also depends on the capacity of the agent to count as a continuous person and self. Not only must I be able to relate to the actions I perform as owned by me, I must also be able to relate them to my previous doings. This is the reason why autobiography becomes such an important genre in the slaves’ struggle for discursive freedom. Since Augustine’s *Confessions*, autobiography has been concerned with the question how agents can change and still remain the same person. How can consciousness be continuous while the self changes over time?

Though Augustine does not talk of personal identity, it is from his *Confessions* that we have come to think of personal identity as something established by subjective acts of imaginative memory relating the past to the present. For this reason, memory often becomes the very subject of autobiography, as when writers conjure past moments in acts of present imagination. James Olney, a distinguished scholar of autobiography, has noted that such authorial acts by which the autobiographer relates past events to the moment of recollective writing (“I can see even now”) are curiously absent from the slave narratives whose status as autobiography he denounces (with the sole exception of Douglass). Because the slave narratives were written to document slavery rather than the personal lives of narrators, the ex-slave was, in Olney’s words “debarred from the use of a memory that would make anything of his narrative beyond or other than the purely, merely episodic, and he is denied access, by the very nature and intent of his venture, to the configurational dimension of narrative” (Olney, 1984, p. 150).

Though it would be tempting to explain the lack of imaginative subjectivity in the slave narratives by reference to the reification of slaves, Olney is right to argue that the imaginative deficit in the narratives derives from their deliberate rhetorical purpose, which was to document slavery rather than recollect and

interpret individual lives. However, we must add that there is a real struggle for personal identity (between the slave's former and present self) in many of the narratives, which Olney ignores because he is too concerned with a traditional, hermeneutic understanding of selfhood and identity.

This struggle concerns the accountability of the narrators for past actions. For while slaves may alienate themselves from actions they were coerced to perform (since their lack of freedom is equivalent to a denial of responsibility), the slave narrators, in their insistence on their accountability as free persons, are often eager to confess transgressions they performed or suffered as slaves in order to avoid coercion. Harriet Jacobs (1861) felt so ashamed of the sexual harassments she had suffered as a slave that she could only publish her narrative pseudonymously, but her most daring confession is found in her account of how she debased herself morally by taking a black lover in order to cool her master's sexual desire for her. William Brown Wells (1847) confesses how he tricked a fellow slave into receiving flogging intended for him, but only much later regretted his deception. And Henry Bibb (1849) blames himself for having bred children to slavery and betrayed his family back in Kentucky by fleeing to the North. That discussions of the slaves' personal responsibility are required in the narratives is perhaps best attested by Douglass' discussion of why he did not regret having stolen another man's horse during his flight.

Clearly, these moral considerations are meant to prove the narrators' status as responsible agents over time in spite of conditions that forced them to transgress their own moral standards. If the slave narrator is not permitted to lapse into imaginative reconfigurations of his former life, he can instead affirm his status as a continuous person who is responsible for both his present and past actions. Again, Pettit's theory demonstrates why this element in the narratives must be seen as an attempt to assert freedom on the side of the slaves. In his attempt to avoid a definition of freedom that is rooted in the mind, Pettit discards the definition of personhood as continuity of consciousness in favour of a forensic definition of personhood. In order to count as a person, Pettit holds, an agent must be recognized as capable of being held responsible. For without the capability to square their feelings and doings over time agents cannot be fit for discursive control, Pettit argues. This definition of personal identity he derives from John Locke who in his *Essay Concerning Human Understanding* argues as follows:

“Where-ever a Man finds what he calls himself, there I think another may say is the same Person. It is a Forensick Term appropriating Actions and their Merit; and so belongs only to intelligent Agents capable of a Law, and Happiness and Misery. This personality extends it *self* beyond present Existence to what is past [...] it becomes concerned and ac-

countable, owns and imputes to it *self* past Actions, just upon that same ground, and for the same reason, that it does the present.” (Locke, 1975, p. 26)

I have quoted Locke at length because his definition of personhood gives a clear description of what is at stake in the slave narrators’ attempt to assert themselves as persons who must “impute” their past actions in order to count as responsible and free persons in the present. The forensic definition of personhood is especially relevant for our present case because slaves were not accepted as full legal subjects. Colonial slave laws defined slaves as the chattel of their owners, thus refusing any rights of legal protection to slaves, and, though slaves in the antebellum period were allowed a minimal protection by the law and could in some cases even defend themselves in court, the idea that slaves were mere chattel persisted in antebellum law, where slaves could not witness against white men in court (Finkelman, 2010, p. 437). Correspondingly, the Fugitive Slave Act of 1850 permitted slave owners and their representatives to arrest fugitive slaves in free states without having to prove the identity of their prisoners in court. Some abolitionists therefore encouraged trials against fugitive slaves, as in the case of Margaret Garner (famous thanks to Toni Morrison’s account, *Beloved*) who committed infanticide in a desperate attempt to save her children from slavery when she and her children were arrested by their owner. Abolitionists who saw her case as an extreme proof of the desperate condition of slaves were eager to have her tried for infanticide, but eventually Garner was returned without trial to her owner who restored her to slavery. Like other fugitive slaves, she was not granted the legal status of personhood and was legally debarred from giving evidence in her own case (see Reinhardt, 2002 for a detailed discussion of the Garner case). As Morrison reminds us, Garner was never permitted the minimal discursive control to tell her own story, which only survives through external sources.

From a theoretical perspective, it is important to notice the difference between the forensic definition of personal identity found in Locke and Pettit on the one hand and the more traditional Augustinian understanding of personal identity on which Olney draws on the other. While the latter bases personal identity on our internal mental capacity to recollect past experiences, the former offers an external and social definition of identity which relies on our capacity to answer to past actions. The former concerns only the continuity and changeability of the self, while the latter concerns the person in his or her relation to other people.

PERSONAL FREEDOM

The question of personal identity as a requirement for freedom is further complicated in the case of fugitive slaves, for, after their escape, they had to change their names and hide their previous identity in order to avoid slave searchers. Taking a new name and a new identity is a commonplace climax in the narratives which marks the transition from bondage to freedom. Often the slaves bore the names of their masters, and for this reason they detested their family names. In some cases, as that of the mulatto William Wells Brown, the slaves were even fathered by their masters. In his narrative, Wells Brown describes how he was forced by his owner and biological father to change his first name to Sandford when the latter begot a legitimate son who, for inscrutable reasons, was also baptized William. Here is Brown's sardonic comment:

"It is sometimes common at the south, for slaves to take the name of their masters. Some have a legitimate right to do so. But I always detested the idea of being called by the name of either of my masters. And as for my father, I would rather have adopted the name of "Friday," and been known as the servant of some Robinson Crusoe, than to have taken his name. So I was not only hunting for my liberty, but also hunting for a name." (Brown, 1847, p. 98)

Douglass changed his name several times in the immediate aftermath of his flight, thus skipping from Frederick Bailey to Frederick Stanley and Frederick Johnson. Upon his arrival in New Bedford, he discovered that Frederick Johnson was such a common name that he asked his host to give him a new name, finally settling on Douglass (Douglass, 1845, p. 112). More self-consciously, Henry Box Brown promoted his own fugitive narrative by choosing a middle name referring to the legendary three-foot container in which he was mailed to the North.

If the fugitive slaves saw their new names as a promise of freedom, the change of identity was also a challenge to their freedom for reasons that must be fairly obvious from our argument. In order to be accountable as a free person and enjoy discursive control, one must, as we have seen, be able to endorse the legacy of one's accumulated personal history.⁵ However, this also means that hiding or losing one's previous identity becomes a predicament for personal freedom. "It is common for slaves to answer to any name, as it may suit the humours of

5 This explains why the slave narrative was always more than just a weapon to fight slavery. In fact autobiography has remained a decisive means in African-American literature to affirm the free self.

the master,” remarks one John Brown, not the infamous abolitionist of Harpers Ferry, about his dizzying past (Brown, 1854, p. 1).

Because the personal identity of fugitive slaves was so fragile, slave narrators make extraordinary paratextual efforts to prove their identity in their books. The typical slave autobiography of the 1840s and 1850s contains signed photographs or engraved portraits of the narrators and testimonials and letters by persons of public renown, such as editors, writers, abolitionist politicians, and clergymen, who validate the identity and reliability of the narrator. Without this external bestowal of discourse control, the narratives were simply not taken seriously by the public, whereas narratives introduced by major public figures like William Garrison, Wendell Phillips or Harriet Beecher Stowe easily became bestsellers. Douglass’ autobiography, prefaced by both Garrison and Wendell Phillips, was issued in 13 editions in between 1845 and 1847, and by 1860 sold 30,000 copies, while William Wells Brown’s autobiography from 1847, endorsed by the antislavery leader Quincey Jones, went through four editions in its first year of publication. The best selling narrative by far, however, was *The Life of Josiah Henson* (1849) whose sale figures rose to 100,000 copies after Harriet Beecher Stowe claimed she had based *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* (1851) on Henson’s autobiography (cf. Foster, 1979, p. 22).

Alongside these paratextual efforts, we also find substantial efforts by slave narrators to identify themselves in the narrative texts. The very opening sentence of the vast majority of narratives begins with a statement locating the place and (lack of) known circumstances of the narrator’s birth: Case in point, Douglass’s introit: “I was born in Tuckahoe, near Hillsborough, and about twelve miles from Easton, in Talbot county, Maryland. I have no accurate knowledge of my age, never having seen any authentic record containing it” (Douglass, 1845, p. 1). As slaves were often separated from their closest family early in life, the only record that could identify the slave narrators’ past was the names and locations of previous masters.

The scarcity of evidence of the slave narrators’ past identity explains the use of declarative speech acts with which the narrators identify themselves, as when Douglass solemnly ends his narrative with the words: “I subscribe myself, Frederick Douglass [facsimile of signature], LYNN, Mass., April 28, 1845” (Douglass, 1845, p. 125). As Olney correctly insists, the slave narratives distinguish themselves from all other autobiographical writings by their unusual insistence that their authors actually exist. We should perhaps add that this is also a distinguishing feature in respect of other pieces of testimonial literature which is usually more concerned the veracity of its testimony than proving the actual

existence of the witness.⁶ It only stresses that the writing self in slave autobiography is defined in legal rather than subjective terms. What matters even more than the veracity of the narratives' content (which is certainly important too), is the witness' capacity to assert him- or herself as a person capable of discursive control, a person who can witness and publicly answer to his or her testimony.

A BLACK ATLANTIC REPUBLICAN TRADITION?

As we have seen, Pettit's theory of freedom is largely compatible with the experience, thoughts and intentions found in American slave narratives. There can be no doubt that slave narrators took considerable and conscious efforts to assert discursive control by establishing their identity as responsible agents. Respectively, the slave narrators' political struggle for freedom is driven by a conception of freedom which is consistent with Pettit's republican understanding of freedom as non-domination rather than non-interference. While proponents of slavery protested against limitations of slavery as an illegitimate interference (either as federal interference with state legislation or as governmental interference with private liberty), the slave narrators and black abolitionists protested against the arbitrary domination that was forced upon slaves as a violation of their freedom.

Does this suggest that we can distinguish a black Atlantic tradition of republican thought? Or to put the question differently: does the fact that the slave narratives can be read in accordance with republican ideas of freedom suggest that the narratives were consciously written along republican figures of thought? There is no straightforward answer to this question. With the exception of Douglass, the poorly educated slave narrators were not political thinkers and spend little time on political and constitutional reflections in the narratives which are, as we have seen, closely bound to personal experience. Nonetheless, there are distinctly republican elements in the rhetorical exposition of slavery. First of all, massive descriptions of arbitrary coercion and its corruption of virtue are

6 This is not a categorical distinction, however, but one of degree. Thus, the fear that traumatic experience may lead to social death is not unusual in witness literature, especially among Holocaust survivors. Primo Levi writes of his worst nightmare as a prisoner in Auschwitz, in which he survives and is restored to his former life but realizes that even his closest relatives are indifferent to his story and act as if he still was not there (Levi, 2008, p. 66). Still, the efforts taken by the slave narrators and their supporters to prove their very existence is quite exceptional.

found in all narratives, which invoke a deep-seated concern in American political ideology and rhetoric that is intimately connected with the Atlantic republican tradition (Pocock, 1975; Dickson D.B. Jr., 2007, p. 38). Second, slave narrators persistently define themselves by their lack of civic and legal status, and their exposure to arbitrary domination, not by their race or cultural identity. Though the fugitive slave writers were well aware that racism persisted in the abolitionist North, the defining category for them concerns their civic status rather than colour or socio-cultural background. For strategic reasons, questions of black identity are played down in the narratives which were primarily intended for a broad white audience. After the Civil War, however, freedom in the republican sense as non-domination was replaced by racial equality as the primary political objective of black writers, who found the freedoms of emancipation slowly eroded by the implementation of depriving Jim Crow laws. By then the republican notion of freedom had lost its rhetorical sway.

If we look from a broader perspective at the antebellum slavery debate, it furthermore becomes clear that the slave narratives were also rhetorically influenced by proslavery pamphlets, even as they sought to refute them. Recently, the historian Carl J. Richard has observed how advocates of slavery like John C. Calhoun, leader of the pro-slavery faction in the Senate in the 1830s and 1840s, drew extensively on classical political philosophy. In particular Aristotle's definition of the "natural slave" as a person who is intellectually and morally incapable of liberty appealed to southern arguments and was twisted racially (pace Aristotle) to become a vindication of white supremacy (Richard, 2009, p. 189). In this way, Aristotle's political philosophy was used as evidence against the hypothesis of the state of nature, seen by many southern intellectuals as the root of abolitionism, in which modern political thinkers like Hobbes, Locke, and Rousseau had argued that men were originally free and equal individuals (Richard, 2009, p. 192).

The slave narrators were not in a rhetorical position to dispute the "neo-Aristotelian" vindication of natural slavery among writers like Calhoun by arguing in terms of the state of nature hypothesis, bound as they were to statements of experience rather than theoretical convictions. However, what they could do instead, and with greater authority, was rebuke the very idea of the natural slave by portraying their own struggle for freedom, and, secondly, portray the morally and economically corrupting power of slavery that they had witnessed. Douglass speculates that it was slavery which brought about the fall of classical Athens (Richards, 2009, p. 194), and in the narratives we find several reflections on the ways in which domination depraves the slaveholders, who are portrayed as unproductive, hypocritical, and victims of their own desires. Interestingly, the

antebellum slave narrators, in contrast to their white abolitionist allies, rarely conceive of freedom as an inalienable right. Instead they are consistent in their criticism of the corrupting power of domination and their conception of freedom as the opposite of domination. In this sense, they furnish the Atlantic republican tradition with a valuable appendix.

In relation to the republican tradition, it is interesting to find republican figures of thought among the slave narrators expressed from a perspective which, for once, is the very opposite of that of the free citizen. Nonetheless, there is, as we have seen, a thorough convergence between the modern republican conception of freedom as non-domination and the beliefs and experiences found in slave testimony. I see this as an argument that Pettit's theory of freedom is not only philosophically, but also empirically, valid. However, there is another conclusion we might draw from the present analysis, which concerns the understanding of the witness as an autobiographical person. There is a tendency in much scholarship on autobiography and witness literature to emphasize the inner, psychological, and mental aspects of the witness's memory at the expense of its external agency. The aim of the slave narratives, however, was not to recover or represent the minds of the slaves but to fight slavery by asserting the discursive freedom of the slave narrators as witnesses. Their notion of personal identity is therefore a legal one which urges us to acknowledge the witness as a responsible agent rather than a mere victim. Certainly, this is an aspect of witnessing that antebellum slave narratives can help us recognize and understand in other kinds of autobiography where it appears less obvious.

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