The Narratives of the Later Lives of Frederick Douglass: Old-Age Autobiography Before Senescence

Old age and even one's experience of old age, like so much else, is socially constructed. While certain long-held prejudices and accounts of aging have remained fairly static, much has changed with regard to how we understand aging and the elderly. In the later years of the nineteenth century, prior to the development of senescence as a unique and distinct stage of life, the meaning of old age was up for debate. Not only were people unsure about what number of lived years qualified one as an old person, but the meaning of old age itself was in flux. These meanings had special import to those who lived and aged through this period of contested and changing descriptions. The concept of chronological aging suggests an inevitable, even, and incremental process, but this is not the only way in which aging has been experienced. In the late autobiographical writings of Frederick Douglass, we find a different accounting of the past and a different narrative strategy that adds new dimensions and chapters to our understanding of the senescent subject. What I term the old-age autobiographical project is not to be understood as the mere incremental addition of narrative to an already established life story, but rather a

process of revising, filling out, and reshaping of the entire life narrative. Unlike the diachronic narrative fixity of chronological aging, which can only point to decline, old-age autobiography synchronically expands the possibilities of the past by reexamining and making new meaning from past events and experiences.

1. “Hon. Frederick Douglass,” black and white lithograph by Kurz & Allison (Chicago, no date). Courtesy of the American Antiquarian Society, Worcester, Massachusetts.

With the 1904 publication of his two-volume *Adolescence,* American psychologist and president of Clark University G. Stanley Hall brought the term adolescence into circulation as a unique phase of life and a subject of psychological and sociological research. *Adolescence* had a wide-reaching impact on American culture and transformed the structure and shape of lives and the life narrative. Eighteen years later, in 1922, at the end of his academic and administrative career and two years before his own death, Hall published *Senescence: The Last Half of Life*, an important study of old age. *Senescence* has all the ambitions of his earlier volume and for Hall, this study was understood to be the proper bookend to his scholarly career. While Americanists have devoted much attention to what one scholar has called the fin-de-siècle culture of adolescence, representations of old age remain relatively unexamined and undertheorized. As was the case with adolescence, there were major social and cultural reconfigurations brought about with the medicalization and psychologizing of aging.

Modern, by which I mean secular post-Enlightenment, autobiography tends to follow the plot associated with chronological aging: the autobiographer starts with his or her earliest memories and narrates steadily toward the present. Old-age autobiographical writing, by the nature of autobiography’s necessary fiction of the steady and teleological unfolding of time from the past to the

present, forms a complex site of negotiation between any possible senescent authoring subject and its other, the younger autobiographical subject.

Numerous questions arise at this temporal juncture of past and present: Is there increased pressure to give a meaningful shape to lived experience as one ages? Do older autobiographers use different strategies than younger writers in representing the self and the life narrative? Is there a meaningful difference between the senescent autobiographer who revises an autobiography written at an earlier stage of life and the older autobiographer composing and writing his or her life for the first time? This last question is of particular interest when examining autobiographical writing in the last half of the nineteenth century. This was a moment in which countless people took up autobiographical writing, and many of these were to revise their texts as they aged. For the old-age autobiographer, revision can cause complications. As one ages, the distance between the authorial "I" who wrote the previous text and now, in revising, writes in the present, and the autobiographical subject only increases. The conclusion, the telos of the autobiographical project, shifts and the autobiographer faces a choice in how to close that temporal gap.

It seems rather obvious, but autobiography is a bit of an old-age genre; there is, as G. Stanley Hall writes, an "inveterate tendency of the world to hark back to past stages of life." "As part of the process of reorientation," he wrote, "I felt impelled, as I think natural enough for a psychologist, to write my autobiography and get myself in focus genetically." For Hall, autobiography provided a systematic approach, through deductive introspection, to the orientation of the present to the past. Roy Pascal, in his great book on the autobiography, glosses the genre as "the reconstruction of the movement of a life, or part of a life, in the actual circumstances in which it was lived." It's easy to see why the retrospective mood of autobiography might be attractive for and associated with older writers. Reconstruction of life, to some degree, requires as its source material the fragmentation produced by the temporal drift, the movement, of (many years of) lived experience.

I've been calling the turn of the century the awkward age of autobiography, which has, of course, a deep irony. At this moment in the long nineteenth century, the popular phrase "the awkward age" refers not to the older ages but to the teen years, and especially the teen-age of a young woman. Yet oddly enough the awkwardness experienced by Henry James's young protagonist Nanda, in the novel from which I have lifted that phrase, is what connects her with the elderly Mr. Longdon. James's awkward coupling fits an age in which the future was quite uncertain and the past complex. It was right at this time, in the last quarter of the nineteenth century, that the form of autobiography was becoming rather strange, from third-person narration to fragmented, partial, and non-linear accounts of the past. Many of the older autobiographers who had begun to launch their awkward formal experiments with their writing were, in part, responsible for this change to the genre. Old age during the fin-de-siècle had not yet coalesced into a set of cultural short-hands and norms; it was a moment prior to the idea that old age was a disease from which we could

be cured and before the psychoanalytic account of the mid-life crisis and the so-called depressive anxiety of old age. The fluid meaning of old age is what enabled aging authors to remake autobiographical writing. The various authorial strategies used at the turn of the century reveal that old age is more than the summing of years lived, the teleological vision of chronological aging. Rather they demonstrate that advancing in age cannot and should not be reduced to the dominant narrative mode that Margaret Morganroth Gullette has called the plot of decline.

Frederick Douglass's life and his work span the nineteenth century, and the changing form of his autobiographical project as he entered old age offers an important alternative to the plot identified by Gullette. Douglass was a young man of twenty-seven in 1845 when he published *The Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass,* a text that would come to define his public persona. Douglass would continue to rehearse—for he much preferred oral delivery—and revise this self-creating and self-defining text throughout the next fifty years of his life. He published two major revisions of this autobiographical fragment: *My Bondage and My Freedom* in 1855 and *The Life and Times of Frederick Douglass* in 1881/1882, issuing a revised edition of this later text in 1892/1893. While comfortably within what he called in *The Life and Times* the "sunset" of his life, Douglass continued to revise the material that made up his *Narrative* and his origin story in order to bring "unity and completeness" (his terms) to the text that had become his life. Compelled to write because his public life continued, Douglass continued his revisionary autobiographical writing until the final edition of 1893.

2. "The Life & Age of Man," hand-colored lithograph by James S. Baillie showing the eleven stages of life, each compared to an animal (New York, 1848). Courtesy of the American Antiquarian Society, Worcester, Massachusetts.

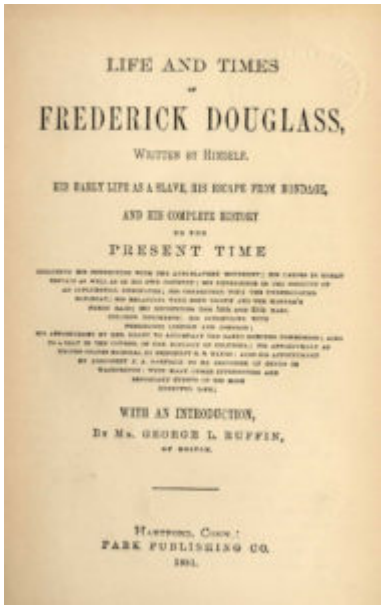
Old-age autobiography pulls itself in multiple temporal dimensions as it seeks to make new meaning from the past while avoiding falling into either a decline or progress narrative. Douglass well understood the power and limitations of self-writing. Writing autobiography, for Douglass, was simultaneously a freeing endeavor, a freedom practice, and a rigidly structured and heavily constrained

activity. He imagined writing itself as making possible an expansive filling out of narrative. In an important and oft-remarked upon passage in *The Narrative of the Life,* Douglass describes learning to write surreptitiously in used copybooks belonging to Thomas, the son of his master. Douglass describes inserting his own hand, his own text, in the spaces left between the source text and Thomas's copy. This depiction of self-making was crucial to his self-representation, and all of Douglass's later autobiographical works preserve this image of what we could call his scene of writing. In continually adding to the body of his *Narrative* through his extensive revision, Douglass uses his own autobiographical writing to produce the additional space, in the form of the many new pages added with each revision, through which he could expand his practices of self-making. This self-making process was remarkably compatible with old-age autobiography in that this mode, old-age autobiography, provides Douglass with an alternative accounting mechanism to the teleological fiction of progressive chronological aging.

Although all of Douglass's autobiographies contain a version of the copybook passage, a description of his process found in his 1893 revision of *The Life and Times* provides a key figure, the notion of "rounding up" and completing, for his old-age autobiographical project: "As I review the last decade up to the present writing, I am impressed with a sense of completeness; a sort of rounding up of the arch to the point where the keystone may be inserted, the scaffolding removed, and the work, with all its perfections and faults, left to speak for itself." Douglass's "completeness" included, of course, finally giving in to public demand for the details of his escape from slavery. In 1845, in the original *Narrative of the Life* text, he explained that he had two reasons for not including this part of his life narrative: that doing so would prevent others from escaping as he had done, and that he would risk the lives of the people who had helped him by publicly identifying them. By 1881 he feels safe enough to fill in the gaps created by these previously withheld details. It is not just that the times have changed, although that is most certainly true. Douglass himself has changed; he has become an old man and has had numerous additional experiences that enable him to recast and reconfigure the meaning of the past. Some of the gaps in *Narrative of the Life* can now be filled, of course, because he is no longer worried about risking his life or the safety of others, but his autobiographical revisions are multidimensional and not driven by the norms of linear chronological completion.

If the way in which I have been describing old-age autobiographical revision as enabling, for Douglass, certain experiences of freedom and self-determination, these same sorts of revisionary practices also involve certain unavoidable constraints. Recasting autobiographical revisions through aging studies enables us to see ambivalences that the dominant aging plot of decline has foreclosed. For someone like Douglass, revision is inextricably linked to his need for publicity, but his continual self-revision of his autobiography is also existential. Douglass's life *is* his project. His coming to literacy and his story, written by himself, was simultaneously a creative and public act. In continuing to write autobiography, he adds to the existing public story by

separating himself from the earlier image of him as a sixteen-year-old slave. At the same time, we might want to consider that *The Life and Times* does not participate within the same literary genre as the 1845 *Narrative.* Douglass, we should note, never uses the term "autobiography" (it is still quite new, but available at the time) in the text of *The Narrative* and he does not introduce the term into the body of his text until the 1892 revision of *The Life and Times.* While *The Life and Times* continues to avoid the emplotment or fictionalizing plots that James Olney argues must be excluded from the slave narrative, it is most certainly not a slave narrative. Douglass avoids fictionalization, but the form of *The Life and Time*s is no longer guaranteed by what has now, because of his advanced age, become only one of many episodes in his life.


LIFE AND TIMES
OF
FREDERICK DOUGLASS,
WRITTEN BY HIMSELF.
HIS EARLY LIFE AS A SLAVE, HIS ESCAPE FROM BONDAGE,
AND HIS COMPLETE HISTORY
TO THE
PRESENT TIME
WITH AN INTRODUCTION,
BY MRS. GEORGE L. RUFFIN,
HARTFORD, CONN.:
PARK PUBLISHING CO.
1881.

3. Title page for a late nineteenth-century edition of *Life and Times of Frederick Douglass*, which was enlarged from Douglass's 1855 *My Bondage and My Freedom* (Hartford, Conn., 1881). Courtesy of the American Antiquarian Society, Worcester, Massachusetts.

Perhaps this is as good a point as any to ask why it is that we neglect nearly all of Douglass's other writings, including *The Life and Times,* in favor of the hypercanonized *Narrative of the Life?* Eric Gardner calls our reduction of the rich nineteenth-century archive of black literature to essentially just the slave narrative a form of tokenism that risks "ahistorical misreadings of texts (and authors)." Do we neglect *The Life and Times* because it is much longer than *Narrative of the Life*? Or maybe we neglect it because it is written by the much older Douglass and thus takes the form of the composite text of the old-age autobiographer. Old-age autobiography, as I have described it, is non-teleological in that it refuses to fall in line with the norms of the plot of decline. Douglass's old-age autobiography is expansive, both in and across time, rendering it a composite form of the slower rhythms of eventual time and quicker pace of chronological plotting. It is the uneven reading experience

produced by the patched together combination of these two temporal modes that has left many readers frustrated and has caused us to neglect this important text.

Nineteenth-century scrapbooking, like the old-age variant of autobiography that I have been describing, was a popular composite archive of self-history, and Frederick Douglass, like many other nineteenth-century Americans, was a scrapbooker. He even encouraged others to keep scrapbooks to record the history of black Americans. Douglass used his scrapbooks to save material he published, essays and announcements addressed to or concerning him, editorials on civil rights, and reports of the many acts of racist violence and hatred, in addition to material relating to the various government offices that he worked for or had dealings with. Douglass used his numerous scrapbooks to collect, layer, and document his life, what Ellen Gruber Garvey would call "writing with scissors." Many of the newspaper clippings included in Douglass's scrapbook from 1892 discuss his advancing age. Columnists and writers call him a "senile negro scoundrel" and a "superannuated person." Derisive comments on Douglass's age and appearance, his "beginning to show marks of age," also, strangely, appear in the prefatory matter "Comments of the Press Upon Frederick Douglass" included in the advance copies of *The Life and Times.* Like his highly organized scrapbooks, *The Life and Times* records Douglass's life not by emendation but by addition. Douglass's autobiographical narrative resembles his scrapbooks in that both serve as steadily accumulating major testaments to his role in public life. Both the scrapbook and his autobiography are anti-teleological forms that demonstrate an alternative to old age's plot of decline.

We see an example of the process of what we might call old age revision by emendation when, in 1892, Douglass adds, right after and beyond the former edition's conclusion, a new third part to the 1881 text of *The Life and Times of Frederick Douglass*. In the opening section of the late revision of *The Life and Times* section, under a first chapter of "Later Life," Douglass situates and frames his narratives and the numerous lives that he has lived up until this point: "It will be seen in these pages that I have lived several lives in one: first, the life of slavery; secondly, the life of a fugitive from slavery; thirdly, the life of comparative freedom; fourthly, the life of conflict and battle; and, fifthly, the life of victory, if not complete, at least assured." Yet it would not be the case that "victory" had been achieved.

In this section Douglass, in effect, restarts his autobiographical project but he does so now from the vantage point of old age. He includes an autobiographical apology, the traditional opening move for almost all forms of self-writing in the nineteenth century, for his recursive autobiography that offers a justification that remains in tension with the life of victory: "I have … been embarrassed by the thought of writing so much about myself when there was so much else of which to write. It is far easier to write about others than about one's self. I write freely of myself, not from choice, but because I have, by my cause, been more forced into thus writing. Time and events have summoned me to stand forth both as a witness and an advocate for a

people long dumb, not allowed to speak for themselves, yet much misunderstood and deeply wronged." While political needs once more drive his writing, he adopts a different set of autobiographical conventions as both he and the century age. These conventions, registered in the form of his prose, invoke the synchronic dimension of old-age autobiography as he revises his existing diachronically structured text.

Old-age autobiography provides Douglass with different strategies for thinking about his own past and the passing of years than the rigidly structured linear scheme that can only lead into the future and into decline. We see an example of this when Douglass describes how, following emancipation, he was initially at a bit of a loss about where to redirect his energy. He has something like a vocational crisis. "Outside the question of slavery," he writes, "my thoughts had not been much directed, and I could hardly hope to make myself useful in any other cause than that to which I had given the best twenty-five years of my life." While contemplating this feeling, he is called upon to give a commencement address at Western Reserve College. He recalls the event of this speech as not a push into a new direction, another political cause, but in fact a realization that his previous work was not yet complete. "It won't do to give them an old-fashioned anti-slavery discourse," he writes. And then, in a parenthetical aside: "(I learned afterwards that such a discourse was precisely what they needed, though not what they wished; for the faculty, including the President, was in great distress because I, a colored man, had been invited and because of the reproach this circumstance might bring upon the College.)" Douglass describes his realization that what was thought "old fashioned" was not a sense of being obsolete or out of time, but rather a deep demand to return to his work: "Though slavery was abolished, the wrongs of my people were not ended. Though they were not slaves, they were not yet quite free." Douglass depicts himself undergoing a renewal of the demand for him to speak; this renewal comes in the form of a recommitment of his own narrative project. Not dogmatic, but firm in his resolve, Douglass returns, once more, to address an old-fashioned topic because his project is not yet complete.

Acknowledgments

This article was originally delivered as a paper on a panel titled "Senescence and Old Age" and organized by Nathaniel A. Windon for a C19: The Society of Nineteenth-Century Americanists conference in March of 2016. I would like to thank Nate and my fellow panelists for their immensely helpful comments and feedback.

Further Reading

G. Stanley Hall, *Senescence: The Last Half of Life* (New York, 1922).

Roy Pascal, *Design and Truth in Autobiography* (Cambridge, 1960)

Frederick Douglass, *Autobiographies.* Edited by Henry Louis Gates Jr. (New York,

1994).

Ellen Gruber Garvey, *Writing With Scissors: American Scrapbooks from the Civil War to the Harlem Renaissance* (New York, 2012).

Margaret Morganroth Gullette, *Aged by Culture* (Chicago, 2004).

This article originally appeared in issue 17.2 (Winter, 2017).

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