

“It Is Time for the Slaves to Speak”

*Moses Roper, White Networks,
and “Lying Inventions” 1835–1855*

One spring evening in 1838, formerly enslaved African American Moses Roper spoke to a crowded audience in Leicester. During one section of his speech, he declared:

Many will say “This is the slaves’ side of the question. The slave-holders would tell a different story.” You have heard the slave-holders’ story 250 years ago. Now, I think it is time for the slaves to speak.¹

Roper was the first African American to conduct an extensive tour of Britain, and also the first to make such a bold statement: he would always tell the truth of his experience, however harsh it sounded to white Victorians. He dismissed all white perceptions of slavery not only for their bias and untruthfulness but also because that side of the story had been told *ad nauseam*. Impatient and reluctant to listen to slaveholders, Roper placed his testimony above white critics since they had continued to ridicule, destroy, or suppress the Black voice.

Throughout his journeys to the British Isles, Roper used adaptive resistance with mixed success to tell “the slave’s side of the question” in both the public and press. However, his overreliance on radical dissonant strategies jeopardized his employment of adaptive resistance. He deliberately wove controversial language into his performances to “clash” with audience expectations. Whether publicly or privately, Roper refused to compromise and used shock tactics to graphically describe slavery: when white audience members challenged the impossibility of someone being

¹ *The Leicestershire Mercury and General Advertiser for the Midland Counties*, May 19, 1838, 2.

whipped hundreds of times and surviving, Roper replied he merely stated facts but if they did not believe him, there was no other way but to prove it in person.² Roper was effectively being *nonadaptive* in his resistance, as he refused to adapt or be malleable in his message to white audiences, which ultimately threatened, to white audiences at least, the authenticity of his message.

Sidonie Smith argues that “autobiographical storytelling is always a performative occasion,” as a battle for different identities – or selves – occur on stage. The performances of different selves do not always overlap and the spaces between them create “unstable boundaries.” While someone like Roper had physically escaped, he was not mentally free from the memory of slavery and how to narrate his experience.³ In spite of rising white disbelief and negotiating those unstable boundaries of the self, he risked his success and reputation to tell the truth about slavery’s brutality, since this denial threatened his identity and was an insult to everything he had endured. Roper – like many African Americans – carried the heavy burden of his experiences and how to translate this to his audience on stage. When he voiced his desire to wear iron chains down a London street, he threatened to make real a graphic and tortuous symbol of the physical and mental burden that formerly enslaved people carried: the weight of a traumatic past, and a past many people denied.

This chapter is split into three sections: after a brief introduction to the antislavery movement, the first section will focus on Roper’s inability to successfully exploit antislavery networks. A connected hub of antislavery activists did not exist in the same format as when Frederick Douglass crossed the Atlantic a few years later. Prominent individuals who were often part of antislavery networks were extremely influential in crafting or destroying a Black lecturer’s reputation and Roper was no stranger to white sabotage, which limited his later success on the British stage. The second section explores Roper’s performance tactics, which included his radical dissonance. The final section will focus on the impact of this dissonant language on Victorian print culture, as it is highly likely Roper’s blunt rhetoric hindered a positive coverage in the press.

² *Sheffield Independent*, April 21, 1838, 3; *The Bradford Observer*, March 12, 1840, 3.

³ Sidonie Smith, “Performativity, Autobiographical Practice, Resistance,” *Auto/Biography Studies*, 10:1 (Spring 1995), 18–26.

“DISCLAIM HIM THROUGH THE PUBLIC PRINTS”:
ABOLITIONIST NETWORKS AND BLACK LECTURE TOURS

From the late 1830s, Black abolitionist lectures occurred within a climate of British moral superiority and jingoism. During the early nineteenth century, the British Empire had solidified an ideology that focused on (white) and Western principles of civilization, reform, and morality. The ideology of the empire decreed it had a duty to rule over inferior peoples and spread Christianity to the heathen; as the free-trade supporter Richard Cobden stated, “not a bale or merchandise leaves our shores” without bearing “the seeds of intelligence and fruitful thought to the members of some less enlightened community.”⁴

Another crucial aspect of this ideology was antislavery. Having abolished the slave trade in 1807 and slavery in the British Empire in 1834 (despite a period of apprenticeship which ended between 1838–1840), Britain represented itself as a nation defined by liberty. Antislavery activism was tied to a fervent nationalism that interpreted British actions, which heroically bestowed freedom upon the enslaved.⁵ This ideology of antislavery became tied to British moral superiority and can partly explain the often-patriotic welcome of formerly enslaved African Americans to British shores.

As we have seen, since the eighteenth century, British audiences flocked to hear Black testimony and were often stirred by their speeches and writings. John Marrant and Ignatius Sancho campaigned against slavery in the late eighteenth century; Sancho was born on a ship during the Middle Passage and heavily influenced the white abolitionist Thomas Clarkson in his devotion to the antislavery cause. Olaudah Equiano, who wrote the first slave narrative in 1789, penned letters to prominent London newspapers, and marched to the House of Commons with several other men of color to campaign for abolition.⁶ In 1824, the radical Robert Wedderburn published his book *The Horrors of Slavery*, which detailed the cruelties of slavery in Jamaica, particularly the rape and torture of his mother at the hands of his white father, the plantation owner.⁷ From the very beginning of abolition, activists showed that people of color and their testimony were essential to the antislavery mission.

⁴ John Darwin, *Unfinished Empire: The Global Expansion of Britain* (London: Penguin, 2012), 26–32, 274–276.

⁵ Fisch (2000), 1–13. ⁶ Sinha (2016), 123–130.

⁷ Robert Wedderburn, *The Horrors of Slavery* (London, 1824).

African American transatlantic missions to Britain became an important part of the British landscape from the 1830s and 1840s. Nathaniel Paul, Charles Remond, and Moses Grandy were the early pioneers who visited Britain to lecture against American slavery and challenge those who supported the American Colonization Society. Grandy visited Britain in 1842 and corresponded with the British and Foreign Anti-Slavery Society to organize a lecture tour and distribute his slave narrative. The rise of William Lloyd Garrison’s abolitionism and his supporters in Britain ensured a growing network of like-minded individuals who were prepared to offer help, support, and their homes to Black activists who traveled across the nation to lecture against slavery. Garrison’s party, the American Anti-Slavery Society, was founded in 1832 and its newspaper, *The Liberator*, was founded the previous year; Garrison constantly networked, shared information, and exchanged antislavery pamphlets across the Atlantic on an unprecedented scale.⁸

Such networks were formed and nurtured at events such as the World Anti-Slavery Convention in 1840, organized by the British and Foreign Anti-Slavery Society (BFASS). It was attended by more than 500 people from around the globe, with an additional 5,000 who visited or listened to the debates; men and women such as Daniel O’Connell, Joseph Sturge, William Lloyd Garrison, George Thompson, and Lucretia Mott were present, and the latter three individuals were famous for their protest against the BFASS’s refusal to allow women to take part as delegates.⁹ The convention in 1840 was followed three years later by another London-based conference, which similarly broke apart due to factional divisions. Another attempt was not made until 1854, when a convention was specifically designed to bring both the society and Garrisonians together, but further squabbles prevented any concrete change.¹⁰

Formed in 1839, the BFASS was based at 27 New Broad Street, London, where the secretary (John Scoble up until the mid-1850s) worked on correspondence, compiled reports, and wrote articles for their newspaper, *The Antislavery Reporter*. While Roper gave his first lecture in the late 1830s, Scoble and abolitionists loyal to BFASS gathered information from the West Indies, and discovered that many former slave-

⁸ Ripley (1985), 6–10; *Freeman’s Journal and Daily Commercial Advertiser*, June 27, 1840, 2–4. See also Blackett (1983) and Taylor (1974).

⁹ Bric (2013), 61–63.

¹⁰ Richard Huzzey, *Freedom Burning: Anti-Slavery and Empire in Victorian Britain* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2012), 14.

owners continued to exploit Black women, men, and children. The society pressured the government to end the apprenticeship system, as countries such as Jamaica were a hotbed of violence and oppression.¹¹ The society reached out to its extensive support system in order to achieve this: there were numerous branches in the provinces, which included Colchester, Ipswich, Norwich, Cambridge, York, Kendal, Exeter, Bristol, Southampton, Birmingham, Leeds, Manchester, Rochdale, and Edinburgh. A large majority of these networks were organized around Quakers, but Scoble's combative nature often prevented alliances with Garrisonian groups across the country. In 1840, Scoble even went so far as to distribute inflammatory material about Garrison's character and targeted his unwillingness to compromise, particularly when it came to concepts such as perfectionism.¹²

Most successful Black activist tours took place between 1845 and 1865, partly because the abolitionist networks became more concrete in this period. The passage of the Fugitive Act in 1850 and the publication of Harriet Beecher Stowe's *Uncle Tom's Cabin* two years later inspired further fascination with American slavery and a ready market for African American lectures. Victorians were keen to hear these stories against a backdrop of Britain as the moral savior and a place where enslaved Africans could walk free.¹³ As one of the first African American witnesses to appear on the British stage, Moses Roper's story was in demand and the controversies he often created resulted in moderate fame in certain areas of Britain.

Born enslaved in 1815 in Caswell County, North Carolina, Moses Roper suffered from extreme violence and torture as a result of his repeated escape attempts. After his final escape to New York ended in victory, he settled in various northern cities such as Boston to ensure he was not recaptured into slavery. He eventually regarded America as unsafe for him and set sail for Britain in 1835, which was to be the first of at least three trips (he returned in 1846 and 1854, and often stayed for several years at a time). He lectured around Britain in hundreds of churches and town halls, and in 1838, published his slave narrative.¹⁴

¹¹ Howard Temperley, *British Antislavery 1833–1870* (Longman: London, 1972), 34–40.

¹² James Heartfield, *The British and Foreign Anti-Slavery Society 1838–1956: A History* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2016), 32–39, 55.

¹³ Fisch (2000), 1–10, 54.

¹⁴ Moser Roper, *A Narrative of the Adventures and Escape of Moses Roper, from American Slavery* (Philadelphia: Merrihew & Gunn, 1838); Ripley, "Biography of Moses Roper," online via DocSouth, www.docsouth.unc.edu/fpn/roper/bio.html. See also Andrews (1986) and Yuval Taylor, *I Was Born a Slave: An Anthology of Classic Slave Narratives, Vol. 1, 1770–1849* (Edinburgh: Payback Press, 1999).

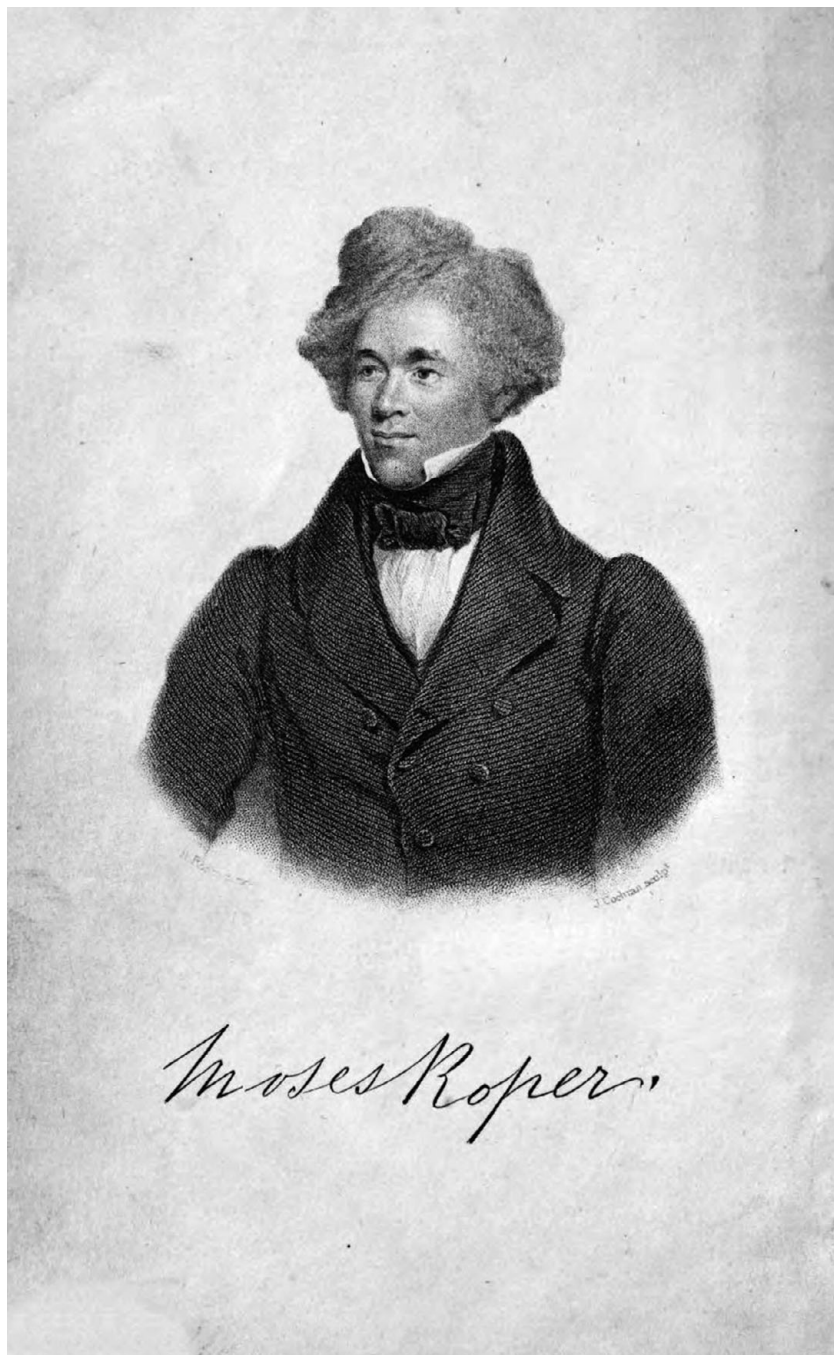


FIGURE 2 Moses Roper, Frontispiece, from *Narrative of the Adventures and Escape of Moses Roper from American Slavery* (Berwick-upon-Tweed: Warder Office, 1848). Courtesy of the British Library.

Almost a decade later, Roper's narrative had gone through multiple editions and an 1846 copy stated it was the "thirty-third thousandth" edition.¹⁵

So far, I have mapped 985 speaking locations for Roper between 1838 and 1861. The majority of these locations derive from the 1848 edition of his slave narrative, where he listed roughly 800 speaking locations organized by religious denomination and then by county. Between 1837 and 1848, he spoke in Baptist, Independent, Methodist, and Quaker churches and town halls in nearly every county in Britain. The remainder of plotted locations are from archival research in Victorian newspapers, which provide more detail in regard to specific location, date, the time, and sometimes a short coverage of Roper's speech. Roper was one of the few activists to speak in the Scottish Highlands, and it is possible to discern the route he would have taken since many of his speaking locations hugged the main route along the coast. There are few locations in central London and this may have been because of the dominance of the BFASS and the competition with other lecturers (antislavery or otherwise). Regardless, the sheer extent of Roper's lecturing tour is astounding, particularly when one considers his travels to rural communities in Cornwall and Wales.¹⁶

When Roper began lecturing in 1837, sustained antislavery networks were few and far between. He tried to exploit connections as much as possible and relied on abolitionists John Scoble and George Thompson, who initially provided money and assistance. They ensured he received an education in schools based in Hackney and Wallingford and helped him attend University College in London in 1836.¹⁷ However, compared to individuals such as Frederick Douglass, Roper did not always receive sustained and direct support from British antislavery networks. He often struggled at times: he recounted one tale where he had survived for three days without food in Manchester until he met a friend who helped him get back on his feet.¹⁸ Similarly, one anonymous letter to *The Bradford Observer* in 1840 noted his lack of support on the lecturing stage, and implied he had little white support or testimonials for this meeting. The

¹⁵ Moses Roper, *A Narrative of the Adventures and Escape of Moses Roper, from American Slavery* (Berwick-upon-Tweed: Warder Office, 1848).

¹⁶ Moses Roper, *A Narrative of the Adventures and Escape of Moses Roper, from American Slavery* (Berwick-upon-Tweed: Warder Office, 1848).

¹⁷ *The Sheffield and Rotherham Independent*, October 12, 1839, 8; Ripley, "Biography of Moses Roper," online via DocSouth www.docsouth.unc.edu/fpn/roper/bio.html.

¹⁸ *The Bradford Observer*, March 12, 1840, 3.

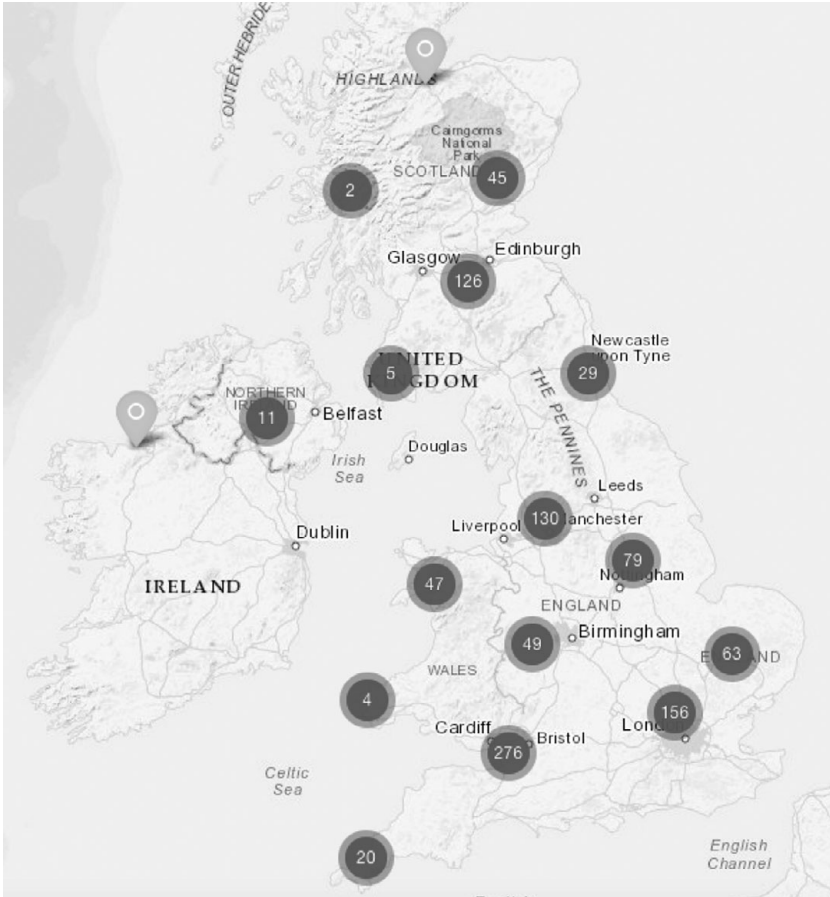


FIGURE 3 Map of Moses Roper’s speaking locations in the British Isles. Author’s website, www.frederickdouglassinbritain.com.

writer pleaded for anyone “of influence [to] show by kindly countenancing the speaker’s exertions” that the people of Bradford supported formerly enslaved individuals.¹⁹

A few months after this Bradford meeting, an abolitionist and religious minister named Thomas Price attempted to sabotage Roper’s reputation. In Roper’s 1838 edition of his narrative, Price had written a testimonial that bore “unequivocal witness to his sobriety, intelligence, and honesty.” His “great ambition is to be qualified for usefulness amongst his own

¹⁹ *The Bradford Observer*, March 5, 1840, 3.

people; and the progress he has already made justifies the belief that if the means of education can be secured for a short time longer, he will be eminently qualified to instruct the children of Africa in the truths of the gospel of Christ.”²⁰ However, two years later, Price openly criticized Roper for a “desultory and mendicant life.” His incessant “begging” was contrary to his “original and professed design of becoming a missionary” and Price demanded Roper remove his testimonial from the narrative.²¹ Price tapped into racial stereotypes that decreed Black people were lazy and charged Roper with renegeing on previous promises to become a missionary in Africa. Roper had presumably changed his mind about his travels there, and Price lambasted his conduct and attempted to smear his reputation, in the hope that it would destroy the possibilities of Roper’s lecturing career.

In the 1848 edition of Roper’s narrative, there were no testimonials and any mention of Price had been removed. This was a deliberate attempt by Roper to place his testimony above white reformers, but it was also reflective of the white abolitionist sabotage he had experienced. Instead of white testimonials, Roper published numerous poems at the end of his narrative to simultaneously record the impact of his speeches and authenticate the truth of his life in slavery. In a commemorative celebration of his Black identity and in solidarity with the Black diaspora, he also included a poem by a man of color who had attended one of his lectures in Scotland.²² With few white testimonials, however, Roper struggled to maintain antislavery networks in Britain. Despite having some form of relationship with John Scoble, it does not appear Roper attended many antislavery meetings organized by British groups, and perhaps Price’s influence ensured he was not invited. In Victorian press reports, Roper does not appear in accounts of BFASS meetings in the early 1840s, and there is no evidence to suggest he was a delegate at the conference in 1840 alongside William Lloyd Garrison.

Regardless, in 1844, Roper had changed his mind about becoming a teacher in Africa. Perhaps this was a result of his financial position, but he turned to the BFASS for help. Through the sale of his narrative, he had raised enough money to live: he had lectured in more than 2,000 towns throughout the country, and sold more than 25,000 English copies of his narrative and 5,000 in Welsh. According to his listeners, “they [had] never heard a lecture more calculated to enlighten” the public

²⁰ Roper (1838), 4–5. See also Blackett (1983).

²¹ *Staffordshire Advertiser*, November 28, 1840, 2.

²² Roper (1848), 59–60.

on American slavery. To prove he was capable (and deserved assistance), Roper asked the BFASS committee for help to take himself and his family to the Cape of Good Hope to settle in Africa and "be useful to that race." Roper reassured the committee he would be "able to settle and make myself useful" as he was proficient in cotton and tobacco cultivation, in an uncomfortable sense trying to sell or commoditize himself to appear worthy of the committee's faith. Roper wanted to assist African people and argued his wife (a white woman from Bristol) could teach in a school. Whether a result of Price's slander or not, his appeal seems to have fallen on deaf ears because Roper returned to America shortly afterward.²³

Roper also managed to raise the ire of Garrisonian abolitionists, which could partly explain his lack of support within that circle. In a letter to Maria Weston Chapman in 1845, Richard D. Webb described Frederick Douglass' Irish tour and how two badly attended antislavery meetings in Waterford were the result of

The bad odour left by Moses Rufus, who was a drunken, ignorant, ill-behaved fool and accustomed to disgrace his race at the antislavery cause wherever he set his foot.²⁴

If Roper was indeed intoxicated, this could partly explain why abolitionists refused to help him, as he was in their mind an ineffective witness to slavery. According to Webb, he did not represent a Black man or his "race" efficiently enough to be made an example of what that race could aspire to be. Or perhaps, he was afraid of the competition. Douglass and Roper traveled around Britain and Ireland in the mid-1840s, and perhaps Webb believed only one African American, and an excellent orator and person of sound character, could attract the public's attention at one time. Webb clearly believed he was a hindrance to the antislavery cause and his behavior – unacceptable to a white audience – threatened the success of future antislavery meetings, which included those led by other Black Americans. This was not just confined to Roper, however, as once rumors reached Webb that Charles Remond may visit England, he was certain this would "injure Douglass's mission" and the antislavery cause.²⁵

²³ Moses Roper to British and Foreign Antislavery Society, May 9, 1844, in Ripley (1985), 134–136.

²⁴ Richard D. Webb to Maria Weston Chapman, October 12, 1845, Boston Public Library Anti-Slavery Collection. Online at www.archive.org, identifier: lettertomydearfroowebb23.

²⁵ Richard D. Webb to Maria Weston Chapman, 1846, Boston Public Library Anti-Slavery Collection. Online at www.archive.org, identifier: lettertomydearfroowebb25.

Although this was a private letter, white abolitionists were no strangers to sabotage and attempted to *publicly* slander Josiah Henson, Henry Highland Garnet, and William Wells Brown throughout the 1850s.²⁶

Unfortunately for Roper, his own limited networks were not strong enough to maintain sustained attack by white critics who deliberately sabotaged his reputation. In an American newspaper, the Reverend. J. C. Bodwell of Massachusetts related an incident involving Roper during a lecture entitled “The American’s Reception in England.” Bodwell had lived in England for fourteen years, which had “given him ample opportunity to judge [the] follies as well as to appreciate the greatness” of England. He made special mention of

runaway slaves, who are feasted and fetted and lionized, and introduced into the leading society, and related amusing incidents that had come under his observation, especially of one Moses Roper, who, representing himself as an American runaway slave, was immediately introduced into the good graces of all Englishmen, received passports to various parties and assemblies, and was on one occasion the only gentleman of a fashionable evening party of the West end precincts of London; that he finally married a fair-haired daughter of England, but became so saucy that his friends, the aristocracy, were obliged to disclaim him through the public prints.²⁷

Bodwell implied Roper was a fraud: he was merely “representing himself” as a fugitive slave and played on the gullibility and sympathy of British audiences. His lies and deception were inherent to the African race, and his interracial marriage clearly repulsed his American listeners as it had done his upper-class British friends. Americans such as Bodwell could “see” straight through the performance and Roper’s poor conduct was proven by his scandalous marriage and “saucy” conduct. His description of Roper as the only Black man in a “fashionable” party echoed eighteenth-century British desires to own a Black enslaved individual or servant and obsess over the “exotic.” In these nineteenth-century meetings, Roper was feted and fawned over, his commodified body the center of white aristocratic voyeurism.

The slander against Roper demonstrated not only the mechanics of abolitionist networks in Britain but also Victorian racial dynamics. Networks were incredibly important for successful lecturing tours and the livelihood of formerly enslaved people, particularly those who relied on their narrative sales to live, eat, and travel. However, successful abolitionist networks were useless if white aristocrats used slander to discredit

²⁶ Blackett (1983), 44, 136–137.

²⁷ *Manchester Daily Mirror*, January 23, 1852, 2.

fugitive slaves, who were already in a precarious position because of negative stereotypes about Black people. It is entirely possible Bodwell referred to Price’s slander here, or the slander Price set in motion. Regardless, Bodwell stated that it was the white aristocracy’s duty to curtail Roper’s success, as he was an embarrassment to society: white people had welcomed and taken him in, but Roper had behaved inappropriately and shamed himself and his friends by association. They were left with no choice but to disown him, like an adopted infant they could no longer look after. Bodwell’s patronizing and racist attitude painted Roper as an impertinent, ungrateful child who spurned white patronage.

We do not know the full impact of this on Roper’s tour, but it possibly explained the often-vitriolic responses in the press toward his lectures and his lack of success in London. Perhaps this also illuminated why he received lackluster support from the BFASS and Garrisonian abolitionists, as both organizations had very influential connections. Unlike Frederick Douglass, Roper had no wealthy friends to help him counteract the slander. During his first tour in 1846, Douglass was maligned with rumors in the press, but the Garrisonian network rallied behind him and collectively caused the offending party to issue a public apology.²⁸ Thus, Roper was restricted in his ability to exploit adaptive resistance as many abolitionist and reformist networks were closed to him, showing how essential white networks could be to Black lecturers in a climate dominated by a white racial schema.

“IT IS IMPOSSIBLE TO DESCRIBE WHAT IT IS TO WEAR THEM”:
ROPER’S PERFORMATIVE TACTICS

In his seminal analysis of Roper’s slave narrative, William L. Andrews argues that the book provided “a hard-hitting tour of slavery as a visitation of hell on earth, conducted by someone who had seen and suffered it all but who had survived to tell his story in a manner likely to evoke both credence and sympathy.”²⁹ Andrews and other critics have described Roper’s narrative as “an alienating text.”³⁰ Despite selling tens of thousands of copies in the British Isles and bringing Roper financial

²⁸ *Dundee Courier*, August 18, 1846, 2.

²⁹ William L. Andrews, *North Carolina Slave Narratives: The Lives of Moses Roper, Lunsford Lane, Moses Grandy & Thomas H. Jones* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2003), 5–6.

³⁰ Andrews (1986), 92–96.

success, his literary style of alienation can also be applied to his performances. One of the key themes of Roper's speeches focused on the suffering he had endured while enslaved. He recounted stories of failed escape attempts and subsequent punishments he received: on one occasion, he was whipped 100 times, and had burning tar poured on his face. According to Roper, these "excruciating" punishments ended before any "great injury" but nevertheless, the explicit and detailed language Roper used to describe this torture inevitably shocked his Victorian middle-class audience, who may have attempted to empathize with his suffering.³¹ In his discussions of bodily pain, Roper tapped into transatlantic narratives of sentiment and sympathy. From the 1830s in America, William Lloyd Garrison and his followers employed sentiment to convince others of slavery's sins and abolitionists focused on Black suffering and family separation, urging supporters to feel what the enslaved suffered.³² Sentimentalism represented a method of emotional engagement with the public; a narrative that emerged from the Romantic period, the ability to empathize with suffering was exploited within literature and linked strongly to political action. If someone was to *feel* suffering, they were more likely to act upon it.³³

The focus on Black pain, then, was a popular trope that developed throughout the nineteenth century. Abolitionists distributed and sold images of tortured enslaved individuals and their scars to highlight the cruelty of southern slavery. In the face of skeptics and racists, white abolitionists focused on violent testimony to bear witness to what slavery truly was. Formerly enslaved individuals were cast as heroes or victims for their escape from slavery, with enslavers as villains. Such narratives revealed complicated racial dynamics as white abolitionists would delete, rephrase, and repackage Black stories to serve a white market. Often, formerly enslaved subjects were reduced to scarred bodies and exposed to a white spectatorial gaze. Abolitionists encouraged this rhetoric and the reproduction of such images, and directly exploited audience sympathy who hopefully would act upon their emotions and do something about slavery.³⁴

³¹ Roper (1838), 9–13, 52–55.

³² Christine Levecq, *Slavery and Sentiment: The Politics of Feeling in Black Atlantic Anti-slavery Writing 1770–1850* (New Hampshire: University of New Hampshire Press, 2008), 190, 208–230; Heather Nathans, *Slavery and Sentiment on the American Stage, 1787–1861* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), 73, 189.

³³ Carey Brycchan, *British Abolitionism and Rhetoric of Sensibility: Writing, Sentiment and Slavery 1760–1807* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005), 2–3.

³⁴ DeLombard (2001), 245–256, 270.

Scars and weapons of torture represented the truth of slavery. Roper used his scarred body to symbolize slavery's brutality, regardless of his audience's reluctance to accept it. The exhibition of his scars and strong denunciations of violence indicated he was willing to do so but only in combination with his fiery rhetoric against it. Roper reclaimed the scarred back from abolitionist rhetoric and reframed it to place more importance on the Black voice.³⁵ Martha J. Cutter is one of the few scholars to substantially analyze Roper's literary work, which she credits for potentially being the first illustrated slave narrative. She argues that Roper resisted the reduction of himself to a tortured body; he navigated the difficult waters of appearing as an agent in his own destiny to avoid commodification.³⁶ Whereas Cutter's discussions refer mainly to Roper's narrative, his lectures in Britain have been overlooked and deserve further study.

Roper borrowed from his eighteenth-century abolitionist predecessors and exhibited whips and chains in his meetings to highlight the brutality of slavery. During a meeting in Sheffield in April 1838, he exhibited whips and a device nicknamed a "negro flapper" used to beat enslaved people who worked in the fields. He also exhibited another instrument of torture that the newspaper correspondent compared to a "cricket bat, perforated with three rows of round holes." When an enslaved person was beaten with such an instrument, the initial blow created wheals on the skin, however, a second blow was delivered to "split them open." He also exhibited chains of "tremendous weight," and the newspaper correspondent believed that despite his sufferings, Roper's attempts to escape showed "the most indomitable perseverance and great fertility of invention."³⁷

In another meeting in Leicester in the same year, Roper recounted his strategies of dissonance. The chapel was "crowded by an intelligent and deeply-interested auditory, who could not fail of having their aversion to slavery strengthened, their sympathies awakened afresh, and their energies aroused to increased exertions [on] behalf of the oppressed." The lavish introduction together with the extensive coverage of this speech stretched across at least three columns of one page, and the frequent references to the sale of Roper's narrative, indicated he had some form

³⁵ Jennifer Putzi, "The Skin of an American Slave: African American Manhood and the Marked Body in Nineteenth-Century Abolitionist Literature," *Studies in American Fiction*, 30:2 (Autumn 2002), 183–188.

³⁶ Cutter (2017), 130–133, 371–375, 396, 405.

³⁷ *Sheffield Independent*, April 21, 1838, 3.

of support in the city, particularly when his audience were encouraged to purchase his literary work, even “if it is the last 2s. you have.” This speech provides unique insight into Roper’s corporeal tactics of subversion. During this meeting, he stated:

I shall show you irons made of the same shape and weight as those I wore myself. I had them made because many thought it impossible to wear them in the way I mentioned. I thought if I could not convince them in any other way, I would shew them; so I put them on, and walked through Cheapside in London. The slaves suffer a great deal, but it is hard to convince the people here . . . Though I shew you the irons, it is impossible to describe what it is to wear them. You may go and see them worn, and yet not know. You must be slaves themselves, before you can feel what it is . . . These handcuffs and collars are made in Birmingham. I saw them in a window, and wondered what they were for, as I knew there were no slaves here; so I went in, and asked the price. The clerk thought I was a West Indian planter or merchant, and shewed me several kinds which he said he had sent out to America. [A large iron collar, and a pair of handcuffs were then produced.] One he showed me had [a] spike in it. I gave him a copy of my book, and told him if he read it I hoped he would never make such irons again.³⁸

Roper’s extraordinary speech highlighted his multilayered activism on the British stage. He had chains and manacles made especially for his lectures, and sought to have them represent – along with his voice – the truth of slavery’s brutality. He argued it was impossible to imagine what it felt like to be enslaved, and even if one was to watch him exhibit these chains or wear them around his neck, one could still not understand what it meant. In his visits to British factories he had never witnessed the whip or instruments of torture forced upon men, women, and children, but stated if Englishmen “think they are worse off than the slaves, let them exchange with them.” He would “find a slave for everyone who will go.”³⁹

As an early activist in the Black American protest tradition, Roper had to painfully explain not only the brutalities of slavery but also the very definition of chattel slavery itself, a practice that did not exist in the British Isles. Other formerly enslaved activists struggled with this, too. William Wells Brown argued that “the more I see and learn of the condition of the working-classes of England, the more I am satisfied of the utter fallacy of the statements often made that their condition approximates to that of the slaves of America.” An Englishman had the choice to seek other employment and carry out their work without the threat of violence; he had the

³⁸ *The Leicestershire Mercury and General Advertiser for the Midland Counties*, May 19, 1838, 2.

³⁹ *Ibid.*

“right to educate his children; and he is the equal of most wealthy person [s] before an English court of justice.” The slave “has no Sabbath, no church, no Bible, no means of grace, – and yet we are told that he is as well off as the laboring classes of England.”⁴⁰ Samuel Ward stated bluntly in 1854 that he needed to accurately explain what slavery was “because [the British] were constantly making great mistakes respecting it.”⁴¹

In this Leicester speech, Roper’s dissonant strategies were further employed in a direct confrontation with the shopkeeper. He does not say how the shopkeeper reacted, or whether he ceased to sell chains, but Roper combined a unique form of artistry with an essential form of adaptive resistance: improvisation. As soon as he saw the chains, he made a decision to instantly question the shopkeeper and demand their removal.⁴² He reappropriated the commercialization of slave chains and purchased them to remind others of slavery’s brutality. Roper’s radical dissonance involved the reappropriation of slavery’s tools; he embodied the violence and drew awareness to the hidden scars he carried. He used them as mute objects on stage to create active protest and demonstration, and in doing so prevented the sale of such items for enslaved people abroad. Because Roper was fair-skinned, the shopkeeper believed him to be white and addressed him as a merchant or slaveholder, and clearly Roper played along with this ruse to find out more details about the chains. Not only does Roper invert Victorian racial norms here but he also employed the trope of passing to lull the shopkeeper into a false sense of security. As Roper described in his narrative, he often employed the trait of passing to deceive white racists for survival.⁴³ In a remarkable feat of Black agency, artistry, and exploitation of print culture, he revealed his true self by an act of protest and handed the shopkeeper a copy of his book: he used his voice, actions, and literary work to liberate himself from a momentary disguise and shame the shopkeeper to remove the items. Coincidentally, Roper expected the shopkeeper to immediately stop the sale of such items; when an individual read about slavery or gazed at the illustrations in Roper’s work, they would do anything to aid in its destruction.⁴⁴ Fifty years before, Olaudah Equiano had argued that only

⁴⁰ William Wells Brown, *The American Fugitive in Europe: Sketches of Places and People Abroad* (Boston: John P. Jewett & Company, 1855), 140–142.

⁴¹ *The Bury and Norwich Post and Suffolk Herald*, July 19, 1854, 6.

⁴² Levecq (2008), 208–209. ⁴³ Andrews (1986), 92–96.

those involved in the slave trade itself could read his narrative without invoking some kind of feeling or action. Reform, moral suasion, and emotion were linked together as a form of evidence against the slaveholding republic, and abolitionists relied on audience indignation to provoke a response and support the antislavery cause.⁴⁵ Other African Americans would adapt this protest tool in the future: in 1849, William Wells Brown distributed a copy of his slave narrative on board the steamer which transported him to Liverpool, and deliberately tried to provoke a reaction between passengers. Brown also echoed Roper's idea to protest with chains: he wrote a letter to the British Museum to request they display chains in their public collections, but unsurprisingly, Brown's idea was rejected.⁴⁶

Intriguingly, Roper's statement about wearing chains down a London street was false. In yet another example of how newspaper correspondents could misrepresent the testimony of Black activists, Roper gave another speech in Leicester a few days later, and demonstrated his awareness of print pathways by correcting the coverage of his previous speech. He said "that he had not – as [the newspaper] stated last week, and he was generally understood to say, – actually walked through Cheapside in irons, but that he had offered to do so, if persons who denied his statements would not be convinced in any other way."⁴⁷ Roper's radical commitment to the exposure of slavery's brutality extended toward bold protest, and in this case, a form of dissonant eye-witnessing. He was prepared to enact such a politicized statement, far removed from an abolitionist stage, to convince the ordinary public (or those who would not be inclined or could attend antislavery meetings) of slavery's brutality. Roper was also incredibly tall (of "gigantic proportions") according to one newspaper, which would have only added further interest to this self-engineered protest-spectacle.⁴⁸ Regardless of whether he staged such a performance or not, it corroborates with Roper's other political strategies, namely the use of his body – not just as a site of suffering or text but

⁴⁴ *The Leicestershire Mercury and General Advertiser for the Midland Counties*, May 19, 1838, 2.

⁴⁵ Michael E. Woods, "A Theory of Moral Outrage: Indignation and Eighteenth-Century British Abolitionism," *Slavery & Abolition*, 36:4 (2015), 675–677.

⁴⁶ Ezra Greenspan, *William Wells Brown: An African American Life* (New York: W. W. Norton & Co., 2014), 204–205, 228–229.

⁴⁷ *The Leicestershire Mercury*, May 26, 1838, 2.

⁴⁸ *The Bradford Observer*, March 5, 1840, 3.

one that was transformed into a literal site of activism. When Roper exhibited chains to show others how they worked, or imagined wearing them in this protest spectacle, his corporeal self became a walking testament to slavery’s brutality.

Roper also employed other performative techniques on the British stage, which included minstrelsy. An assimilationist strategy, he engaged with racial stereotypes of Black people in order to appear familiar to Victorian audiences. One correspondent wrote in 1839, “the painful interest awakened by these harrowing exhibitions, and by the recital of their application to human torture, was relieved by anecdotes of a lively character, displaying many humorous effects of the ignorance of the negro.” Roper seemingly combined graphic stories of torture with minstrellesque techniques, and displayed astute skill in moving from one subject to another in order to lighten his audience’s mood, knowing they (and perhaps he) could not comprehend nor stand three hours of such violent testimony.⁴⁹ In another meeting in 1840, he told the story of a Black female preacher:

Her text was “The sheep shall sit on the right hand and the goats on the left.” “And now brethren, what you tink dis mean? You no know – I tell you den what dis mean. Sheep hah curly hair, nigger hah curly hair; sheep you see mean nigger. Goats hab straight hair; buckra (whites) hah straight hair – goat den white men. Now you see what dis mean.”⁵⁰

Roper’s use of minstrelsy was deliberately subversive as he chose to comment on racial segregation, racism, and slavery. While he played on familiar stereotypes of Black people, he also mocked whites for their “straight hair” and labeled them as farmyard animals as well. His use of assimilation allowed him to subversively subsume Victorian tropes and recraft them for his own performance, and subtly attack white audiences. He used minstrelsy as a base to attract audience attention, and then challenge white supremacy and the racist origins in which minstrelsy evolved.

Minstrelsy can be traced back to 1832 when Thomas Dartmouth Rice performed as the character Jim Crow. Such was its success that Rice traveled to Britain four years later, which inspired performances across the country.⁵¹ *The Times* stated that Rice’s “personification is the beau

⁴⁹ *Royal Cornwall Gazette*, February 15, 1839, 2.

⁵⁰ *Bradford Observer*, March 5, 1840, 3.

⁵¹ Robert Nowatzki, *Representing African Americans in Transatlantic Abolitionism and Blackface Minstrelsy* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2010), 1–5.

ideal of a negro ... [he] has the faculty of twisting his limbs in such a manner as to represent the distortions of an ill grown African." The British public became enamored with Jim Crow and it was adapted in the theater, in songs, in political commentaries, and even the streets. It was not long before the moniker became synonymous with persons of color in England, which represented racial difference and a non-English identity.⁵²

On both sides of the Atlantic, the popularity of abolitionism and minstrelsy revealed an obsession with the Black body. In America, anti-slavery activists borrowed from the realm of entertainment and put African Americans on stage to tell their stories of slavery or exhibit their scars. In turn, minstrelsy borrowed scenes of slavery's cruelty from abolitionists.⁵³ As a result, Rice's plays in the 1830s appealed to Black and white working classes in Britain and in America, featuring Black characters who humiliated white enslavers and white characters who mocked Blacks for stereotypical characteristics such as laziness.⁵⁴ Thus, minstrel shows became increasingly popular on British soil and appealed to all audiences: even Queen Victoria was entertained by a minstrel show during the height of Douglass' fame in 1846.⁵⁵

During his British tours, numerous skeptical abolitionists, writers, newspaper correspondents, or audience members were shocked at Roper's descriptions of brutality. In *God's Image in Ebony*, published in 1854, H. G. Adams wrote of Roper that "one wonders how the human frame could sustain such a merciless infliction of tortures of every kind; assuredly a horse or dog must have died under them; but wonderful are the powers of endurance in man, especially Negroes!"⁵⁶ Such racialized obsession with the bodies of African American men, their capacity to endure pain, comparisons with animals, and an almost pornographic fascination with torture revealed a white supremacist framework bordering on racial science: Roper survived because of his African

⁵² Tom Scriven, "The Jim Crow Craze in London's Press and Streets 1836-1839," *Journal of Victorian Culture*, 19:1 (2014), 93-105.

⁵³ Nowatzki (2010), 3-11, 24-28, 147; Waters (2007), 89-90.

⁵⁴ W. T. Lhamon, Jr., *Jump Jim Crow: Lost Plays, Lyrics, and Street Prose of the First Atlantic Popular Culture* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2003), viii-ix, 4-27.

⁵⁵ Queen Victoria R., July 8, 1846. *Queen Victoria's Journals*, online at www.queenvictoriasjournals.org.

⁵⁶ H. G. Adams (ed.), *God's Image in Ebony: Being a Series of Biographical Sketches, Facts, Anecdotes, Etc* (London: Partridge and Oakey, 1854), 128-129.

heritage, as seemingly, his body could sustain greater heights of pain and torture than whites.

Underneath the racialized language, Adams still practiced reservation about Roper's stories. When Roper was faced with skeptics who openly and publicly challenged his stories of torture, he threatened to enact the same violent punishment upon *them*. Despite his attempt to shroud his performative strategy in humor, Roper was probably one of the few African Americans who *deliberately* antagonized his audience, partially because such descriptions by Adams and others made light of, patronized, and insulted his testimony.⁵⁷ In 1838, for example, Roper stated:

The first or second time that I attempted to speak in public, about three months ago, when I was exhibiting this whip, a gentleman (who I afterwards found a pro-slavery man) got up, and said that he did not believe the statement. He said that a person, after he had given one lash, would have to rest five minutes. I said that I was not able to argue with him, but, having been a driver, if he would walk out into the street, I would give him 100 lashes without stopping.⁵⁸

He employed the same tactic in Sheffield in April 1838, and again in Bradford in 1840:

A gentleman in the meeting interrupted him and disputed the fact, to say nothing of the recipient's capability of endurance, he considered it impossible for any person to administer two hundred lashes without cessation. Moses replied, he had no intention to state ought but facts, and he was sure he kept under the mark, rather than exceeded it, but his facts being disputed he had no other means to prove the truth of his facts but by demonstration. He would therefore say to the gentleman who disputed this fact, that if he would go into the street he would prove the possibility of inflicting two hundred lashes, or if he would prefer it, three hundred, or even five hundred without cessation (great laughter). He would say the same to his present audience, if any gentleman disputed his facts he was willing to prove the truth of what he had advanced by inflicting upon him such a number of lashes as he might feel disposed to receive for the experiment (laughter).⁵⁹

It is difficult to ascertain whether Roper meant these comments in jest, which highlighted a problem with the use of spectacle. The use of such dangerous language was complex because audience reaction could not be predicted. In the Bradford meeting, the newspaper correspondent recorded the audience laughing and it seemed that Roper was deliberately

⁵⁷ Foster (1979), 9–14.

⁵⁸ *The Leicestershire Mercury and General Advertiser for the Midland Counties*, May 19, 1838, 2.

⁵⁹ *Sheffield Independent*, April 21, 1838, 3; *The Bradford Observer*, March 12, 1840, 3.

being subversive to challenge white racism and oppression through humor. He emerged the superior opponent as the gentleman in the audience did not speak again. In the first extract, however, the correspondent does not record audience reaction or the precise way Roper worded this, so it is impossible to know whether this was a dark form of humor with a transparent hint of physical threat. Regardless of his audience reaction, or the consequences of his spectacle, Roper was determined to portray slavery as an indescribable and unimaginable institution. Those who had not felt the lash or suffered from extreme violence – effectively his white audience – could never know what it felt like to be enslaved.

Roper employed subversive humor but paradoxically threatened violence *as part of* the joke. He managed to twist a horrible punishment meant for African Americans into laughter: he had command of the audience and his effective use of humor and oratory dispelled disbelief of his facts and personal character. Roper conjured up an image of an African American male who dragged a white man into the streets to publicly flog him. To a white audience this was an impossible image, and it was humorous to imagine this role reversal of a Black person who whipped a white man; this minstrel-esque narrative disrupted Victorian gentility and inverted social norms.⁶⁰

Roper answered his critics in a completely unique way. No other African American deliberately “antagonized” his or her audience, or threatened to physically harm an audience member, whether in jest or not. Other Black lecturers employed white testimony, read accounts from southern newspapers, quoted from their narratives or other abolitionists.⁶¹ Roper refused to allow his message to be edited and reshaped around white testimony, and simply argued if anyone discredited his facts, he would prove truthful through demonstration. To hear an individual speak or to read such a passage in a narrative shocked British audiences but to bear *witness* to an act of violence and to see the instruments of torture used in person was something entirely different. William L. Andrews argues that fugitive slaves who spoke “too revealingly of the individual self, particularly if this did not correspond to white notions of the facts of black experience or the nature of the negro, risked alienating white sponsors and readers too.” Roper walked a tense tightrope within a

⁶⁰ Glenda Carpio, *Laughing Fit to Kill: Black Humor in the Fictions of Slavery* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), 4–14.

⁶¹ John Sekora, “Black Message/White Envelope: Genre, Authenticity, and Authority in the Antebellum Slave Narrative,” *Callaloo*, 32 (Summer 1987), 494–497, 502.

strict white racist framework between success and alienation, but as he and numerous other African Americans showed, "instead of either conforming to the rules of the literary game or refusing to play, they set about changing the rules by which the game was played even as they played along with it."⁶² Black women and men refused to simply tell the facts without the denunciation of slavery as a system, and in Roper's case, refused to downplay stories of violence.

Roper's improvisational abilities were antagonistic or humorously challenging, which received mixed success. Frederick Douglass on the other hand, was brilliant in his adaption to a new location or an interruption to his speech. Douglass lectured extemporaneously and he could turn the tables on any criticism or disbelief that arose from his white listeners, which allowed him room to answer questions on the spot. Ever the malleable performer, he employed flexibility as part of adaptive resistance to challenge such critics.⁶³ For example, during an infamous speech at a BFASS meeting in London in May 1846, Douglass read from Theodore Weld's *Slavery As It Is* (published in 1839), which collected numerous white testimonials on slavery. A voice from the crowd asked the value of an enslaved person, and Douglass masterfully turned the question on its head and stated although "slaves vary in price," it was well recorded that "when cotton gets up in the market in England, the price of human flesh gets up in the United States." He directly targeted the person in the audience and rhetorically asked them, "How much responsibility attaches to you in the use of that commodity?" When Douglass discussed the relationship between religion and slavery in the South, and how "babies [were] sold to buy bibles" another skeptic shouted from the crowd, "it is not true." Douglass declared "not true! Is it not?" to huge cheers from his audience and proceeded to read an advertisement in a southern paper that specifically identified a church that sold enslaved people. He again rhetorically asked his audience, "I could read other testimony on this point, but is it necessary?" Most of the audience responded in the negative, but one voice shouted for another, which Douglass dutifully gave.⁶⁴ He

⁶² Andrews (1986), 6–7, 89. See also John Ernest, "Introduction," in John Ernest, *Oxford Handbook of the African American Slave Narrative* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014), 1–18.

⁶³ Ronald K. Burke, *Frederick Douglass: Crusading Orator for Human Rights* (New York: Garland Publishing, Inc., 1996), 21.

⁶⁴ Frederick Douglass, 1846, in John Blassingame (ed.), *Frederick Douglass Papers, Series One: Speeches, Debates and Interviews, Vol. 1, 1841–1846* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1979), 269–284.

employed humor in a completely different and non-antagonistic fashion: he mocked his skeptics with skillful rhetoric and invited rather than alienated his audience to participate in the challenge.

Furthermore, to prevent the objectification of his own body, Douglass instead described fictional scenarios based on his experience or physical and sexual assaults against women. While his speeches were often graphic and contained brutal details of Aunt Hester's whippings, he rarely referred to the violence enacted upon himself. Similarly, William Wells Brown tempered certain descriptions or pictorial forms of graphic violence for his panorama: in a speech to a Nottingham audience in 1851, Brown wanted to make clear that "the utmost care had been taken not to misrepresent or exaggerate the subject in the least degree; in fact, that several sketches had not been transferred to canvas lest they might be deemed liable to such a charge." In his navigation of Victorian racial politics, Brown wanted the images on his panorama to be authentic but not too graphic, lest his white audiences would either take offense or deem such images to be unbelievable.⁶⁵ In contrast, Roper bluntly refused to compromise and discussed the torture enacted upon his body in detail. In 1838, he recounted how his former slave-owner had beaten him with a weapon that left wheals upon his skin, which were then "sawed" open. The correspondent noted that "feelings of horror and disgust were expressed at the recital of this barbarity."⁶⁶ In Kennoway in 1846, the local correspondent wrote that Roper's

details of the soul-sickening cruelties perpetrated by the slaveholders and the ignorance and consequent moral degradation of the unhappy victims of bondage, were so repugnant to the feelings of humanity, that we could not have supposed such atrocities would have been committed, unless amid the deep darkness of Pagan superstition; and, especially, that such barbarities would be countenanced and legalized by a people boasting of freedom of their political institutions, and illuminated by the light of Christianity.⁶⁷

Roper's experience invited criticism because white British audiences could not comprehend slavery's true horrors, and dismissed him because of it.

When we compare Roper and Douglass's speeches, another comparison emerges. Roper did mention abolition, but did not usually dwell upon or use it as an opportunity to motivate his audiences into rapture.⁶⁸ If he

⁶⁵ *Nottingham Review*, April 4, 1851, 3. ⁶⁶ *Leicester Chronicle*, May 19, 1838, 2.

⁶⁷ *The Fife Herald, and Kinross, Strathearn and Clackmanan Advertiser*, November 5, 1846, 3.

⁶⁸ *Hereford Times*, August 4, 1855, 9.

did, he employed strategies of dissonance to blame the British for slavery. While other Black abolitionists did not shy away from this, they often balanced it with praise for the nation’s eventual antislavery success. For example, in Carlisle in April 1840, Roper declared that “the English were warm friends to the slaves” but “when out of this country they were the greatest oppressors.” When “the English go to America, China, or Africa, they go to make money, and do not care how they make it, or how many lives they sacrifice to obtain it. Had it not been for the English who sold his parents, the individual who then addressed them would never have been a slave.”⁶⁹ While he chastised Britain, Douglass was a savvy orator who focused on winning his audience over, rather than potentially alienating it. Additionally, Douglass constantly referred to the history of British abolition. In Dublin in 1845, Douglass “implored his audience to keep up this opinion, by making every American slave-holder, every American apologist of slavery who sets his feet upon our soil, feel that he was in a land of freedom, among a people that hated oppression, and who loved liberty.”⁷⁰ In Newcastle in 1847, Douglass declared that “the spirit of emancipation, which broke the fetter of the West Indian slave, had not gone to sleep. They could ill spare that spirit of freedom, that dashed down the bloody altars of slavery in the West Indies, and gave freedom to 1,000,000 human beings, who were groaning under the hoof of the oppressor.”⁷¹

Interestingly, when Roper returned to Britain in the mid-1840s, he lectured at the same time as Douglass in Scotland in 1846. Perhaps Roper learned or borrowed from his example, as he specifically referred to abolition in 1846 in a structured format that mirrored Douglass’ speeches. Roper stated that abolition was

the noblest act of national generosity which was to be found in the records of the world’s history, and declared that while he differed from the principle it involved in acknowledging the right of man to property in man, he yet admired the generosity of the British people in giving £20,000,000 to purchase the freedom of the slaves in the West India islands.

As Douglass did, Roper “proceeded to controvert the opinion that the people of this country had nothing to do with slavery in America, and that they ought not to interfere with the institutions of other countries.”⁷²

⁶⁹ *Carlisle Journal*, April 18, 1840, 3.

⁷⁰ *The Evening Packet*, September 11, 1845, 2. See also *Carlisle Journal*, August 22, 1846, 4.

⁷¹ *The Newcastle Guardian*, January 2, 1847, 6.

⁷² *The Fife Herald, and Kinross, Strathearn and Clackmannan Advertiser*, June 18, 1846, 3.

While Roper refused to temper his radicalism or his graphic details of slavery, this is one example of his self-reflexive representational strategies where he potentially borrowed assimilationist language from Douglass to ensure success on the British stage, something he sorely needed as he was entirely dependent on the sale of his narrative.

“I SHALL TELL THE TRUTH”: ROPER’S STRUGGLE AGAINST
VICTORIAN PRINT CULTURE

During a lecture in Birmingham in 1838, Roper’s strong words against southern Christianity caused some concern amongst the local religious community. Reverend Peter Sibree wrote in his diary that he had advised Roper to tone down his language in regard to slaveholders and Christianity, but received in reply, “I shall tell the truth.”⁷³ Roper refused to be silenced and resolved to always “acquaint the English reader with the evils of American slavery.” Although his descriptions of violence were “incredible,” the scars on his back acted as a “standing testimony to the truth.”⁷⁴ Douglass was a skillful virtuoso who mastered the art of compromise between assimilationist and dissonant language, a talent that Roper did not have or refused to exploit on principle. Ultimately, his refusal to compromise and his desire to place his testimony above white accounts, ensured some negative coverage in the press that threatened his successful employment of adaptive resistance.

Depicting slavery was a complex but essential abolitionist aim, and conflicts arose as to the best means of representation.⁷⁵ Authenticity was an unending struggle for African American writers and lecturers, and their attempts to reconfigure space on a British stage were entwined with a battle to assert their truth. Abolitionists wanted to create a verifiable story for consumption and thus wanted to make sure facts were ironclad and detailed. Testimonials at a narrative’s beginning were essential, together with written letters of introduction to other abolitionists or antislavery sympathizers.⁷⁶ The abolitionist politics surrounding authenticity revealed the racial undercurrents between white and Black, and how a white abolitionist framework confined and constricted Black voices. Slave narratives above all had to represent themselves as truthful stories with a clear basis on fact. Those narratives in which the narrator was not a central figure required them to separate their written story from their

⁷³ Walker (2011), 102–106. ⁷⁴ Roper (1838), iv, 9–13. ⁷⁵ Wood (2000), 8, 81.

⁷⁶ Sekora (1987), 496–502. See also Bernier (2006), 57–78.

own memories and sacrifice this in favor of facts made knowable to a white audience. White approval of a particular narrative focused on the Black narrator’s ability to edit his truth into a form acceptable for white consumption.⁷⁷

In an early attempt to confront the dilemma of depicting slavery, white abolitionist Theodore Weld published the aforementioned *American Slavery As It Is: Testimony of a Thousand Witnesses* in 1839. Weld combined accounts from former enslavers, abolitionists, newspaper articles, and letters to paint a visual picture of slavery and to refute proslavery arguments that it was a benevolent institution. Abolitionists and the northern reading public deemed such statements to be more truthful because the abolitionists had collected advertisements, firsthand accounts, and newspaper articles from enslavers, and they used their own words to denounce the system. Weld described how “great care should be observed in the statement of facts” and only “well-weighted testimony and well-authenticated facts” would be published. Readers were invited to be “a juror to try a plain case and bring in an honest verdict” against slavery. “Corroborative facts” were essential so as to lend more than one voice to the same story, and thus the truth could then defeat proslavery arguments and win support for abolition. Weld clearly and boldly spelled out the nature of slavery in the South, and structured his work so the verdict against slaveholders would always be guilty. In an obvious omission to contemporary eyes, enslaved testimony was neglected, which was used to convince mainly white audiences that slavery was a sin.⁷⁸

The book’s success epitomized the growing fascination with sentimentalism and torture iconography. The identification with a victim aimed to reduce the distance between victim and spectator, but that distance was needed for such sympathy to function. Images of naked or semi-clothed men and women, in chains, or bleeding from gaping wounds formed a staple in sentimental literature, and white abolitionists in particular often focused on obscene accounts of burning enslaved people at the stake or horrific accounts of torture. Instead of constantly rousing indignation or horror, spectators felt a certain kind of voyeurism where wounds were no longer repulsive, but exciting. Weld himself stated “[m]y own heart was becoming so hardened that I could witness with

⁷⁷ Andrews (1986), 4–30.

⁷⁸ Theodore Dwight Weld, *American Slavery As It Is: Testimony of a Thousand Witnesses* (New York: Anti-Slavery Society, 1839), 3, 7, 16–20.

comparative indifference, the female writhe under the lash.” The saturation of such images and literature, in some ways, led to a fetishization of pain and suffering.⁷⁹

Many British abolitionists used Weld’s testimony to authenticate formerly enslaved individuals and tapped into this voyeuristic narrative in their descriptions of slavery. In 1841, the *North Wales Chronicle* published an attack on Roper’s depictions of violence. A BFASS supporter wrote to the paper in response, and while on the surface it appeared a defense of Roper (very much akin to the testimony by white abolitionists at the start of slave narratives), the correspondent made no reference to Roper’s character or reputation. Instead, he made a case against the newspaper for its skepticism about the weapons of torture used during slavery. The letter urged readers to consult BFASS reports, as the society had collected evidence to suggest violence toward enslaved people had not been exaggerated. The style and tone of this letter was almost exactly the same as Weld’s book, with long sentences that detailed barbarity after barbarity:

[The slaves] are often stripped naked, their backs and limbs cut with knives, bruised and mangled by scores and hundreds of blows with the paddle and terribly torn by the claws of cuts, drawn over them by their tormentors, that they are often hunted with blood-hounds and shot down like beasts, or torn in pieces by dogs, that they are often suspended by their arms and whipped and hearten till they faint flesh branded with red hot irons, and that they are unarmed, mutilated, and burnt to death over slow fires.⁸⁰

By chronicling such atrocities, Britons deliberately erased discussions about British practices of cruelty in the Caribbean; focusing on American problems was another way of exhibiting a smug sense of moral superiority.⁸¹ Regardless, abolitionists believed that in chronicling Black bodily pain in excruciating detail audiences were more likely to be sympathetic, as it felt more realistic and close to their imaginary.⁸² Listing such cruelty was a powerful method to “prove” the violence against the enslaved and how white people saw them as victims and witnesses to horrendous cruelty. The emphasis on enslaved suffering reinforced the abolitionist desire to describe pain and how white people were crucial to

⁷⁹ Karen Halttunen, “Humanitarianism and the Pornography of Pain in Anglo-American Culture,” *The American Historical Review*, 100:2 (1995), 308–325.

⁸⁰ *North Wales Chronicle*, November 23, 1841, 3. ⁸¹ Fisch (2000), 54–60.

⁸² Douglas A. Jones, Jr., *The Captive Stage: Performance and the Proslavery Imagination of the Antebellum North* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2014), 140–141.

remove that suffering. The testimony and support from a white man, and a BFASS supporter, were necessary to ensure readers that Roper’s stories were authentic, a narrative that reinforced white racist power structures. Literary work written by white abolitionists not only acted as further evidence and testimony to Black voices but also appeared as the authority on slavery rather than the enslaved. The BFASS supporter instructed audiences to read white-authenticated BFASS reports rather than referring to Black testimony. In a complicated dynamic, white audiences needed to *witness* white support of Black *evidence*.

As seen through this minor controversy in the press, Roper’s desire to represent his true self invited criticism both within and outside the abolitionist stage. Dwight A. McBride argues that Black authors “had to conform to certain codes.” Abolitionism “produced the occasion for bearing witness, but to an experience that had already been theorized and prophesied . . . before the slave ever speaks, we know the slave, we know what his or her experience is, and we know how to read that experience.”⁸³ Thus, he or she had to be careful about the presentation of their version of the ‘real’ or ‘truth’ lest it jar with mainstream views about slavery. In order to be successful, Black witnesses had to understand white conceptions of slavery and how to address white audiences, and once they had successfully navigated “the horizon of the white reader, the more politically effective his or her testimony will be.”⁸⁴

McBride’s incisive analysis of the politics of witnessing adds context to Roper’s difficulties of speaking the truth on a British stage. Before he embarked on the lecture circuit, Roper experienced accusations of falsehood in 1836. In a letter to the *Patriot*’s editor, Roper wrote that the Reverend R. J. Breckinridge questioned “the accuracy of a statement made by me in reference to the burning alive of a slave in the United States.” Refusing to allow this defamation to stand, Roper exploited this medium of print culture to challenge Breckinridge’s ignorance. He assured both Breckinridge and the editor that the story was true and proceeded to relate the “particulars of that melancholy event.” An

⁸³ Dwight A. McBride, *Impossible Witnesses: Truth, Abolitionism, and Slave Testimony* (New York: New York University Press, 2001), 3–10. See also Calvin Schermerhorn, “Arguing Slavery’s Narrative: Southern Regionalists, Ex-slave Autobiographers and the Contested Literary Representations of the Peculiar Institution 1824–1849,” *Journal of American Studies*, 46:4 (November 2012), 1009–1033 and Augusta Rohrbach, “Making It Real: The Impact of Slave Narratives on the Literary Marketplace,” *Prospects*, 26 (2001), 137–162.

⁸⁴ McBride (2001), 85–95, 151–154.

enslaved man named George was chained to a tree, “the chain having been passed round his neck, arms, and legs, to make him secure.” A large amount “of tar and turpentine was then poured over his head [...] and the miserable man perished in the flames.” Long after the lynching and as a warning to the local enslaved population, “not only was the stump of the tree to which the slave George had been fastened to be seen, but some of his burnt bones.” Roper wrote that he was “ready to attest in the most solemn” manner if necessary, and he stated that “though I have been a slave, I trust my evidence will be received on matters of fact which have come within the range of my own observation.”⁸⁵

Two years later in 1838, the *Wexford Conservative* attacked Roper’s unconscionable twisting of facts in regard to the Methodist Church. Astounded that Roper had “obtained permission to exhibit himself as an emancipated slave,” the correspondent asked rhetorically, who would believe Roper – “an unknown individual” – over the course of history?

Nobody knows any thing about him. He is going through the country holding meetings, at which he speaks with considerable fluency for two or three hours, though he says, he received only eighteen months of English Education! What a likely story this! that a negro, in so short a time, could learn the English language so perfectly, as to be able to keep up the attention of his auditory for two or three hours!! He appears to have read the History of the Inquisition in that time, and to have committed nearly the whole of it to memory; for, there never was a mode for the torture of heretics, used by the *holy fathers*, with which he is not acquainted [...]. Thus like all other artful and self-interesting agitators, he lays hold on the prejudices of some and the credulity of others, to work out his plan of *ways and means*, through the country.⁸⁶

The correspondent completely denied Roper’s identity as a formerly enslaved individual. He scarcely contained his disbelief that such a liar would place himself before an unsuspecting and philanthropic Irish public. The first obvious clue to Roper’s deception was his supposed lack of education; it was impossible for a Black man to speak to a crowded audience for more than two hours if he had acquired a full education only in the previous two or three years. Roper’s trauma was ridiculed and the torture he described was merely something he memorized from reading about the Spanish Inquisition in the fifteenth century. His accounts of slave tortures – particularly those committed by so-called religious men – were so horrid they were deemed unbelievable. Most shockingly of all,

⁸⁵ *The Bradford Observer*, July 28, 1836, 6.

⁸⁶ *Wexford Conservative*, October 6, 1838, 3.

Roper criticized the Methodists at the expense of Catholic slaveholders, and not only had he arranged a lecture tour that was based on lies but his testimony relied on hoodwinking Quakers in particular “into the belief of such palpably incredible descriptions of cruelty.”⁸⁷

Unfortunately, the press vitriol continued in southern England from a correspondent to the *Hampshire Advertiser and Salisbury Guardian*. The British people knew about “the horrors of slavery and its dreadful extent” but his display of whips and chains were so implausible they could not be true.⁸⁸ Although the correspondent had not heard Roper speak at this point, he based his account on hearsay and wrote:

We have heard of a cat having nine lives, but Sambo must have had at least 18, and his fingers and toes, doubtless, possess the re-producing powers of the crab. We sincerely congratulate him on his final escape. It seems we [were] wrong in imagining the various instruments of torture he exhibits were brought by him from America – as Sambo had them forged for his own especial use at Birmingham . . . Slavery is the foul blot which obscures and defiles all that is great and good among men who achieve freedom for themselves, but denied it to their fellow men. But it is not the monstrous perversions and lying inventions of Moses Roper that will either enlist English sympathies or effect a change in the American character. We have the evidence of better authorities than Moses Roper for the real treatment of slaves.

According to this correspondent, Roper was an “anti-truth telling-and-unbelieving nigger” because no one could survive such brutality.⁸⁹ If an individual faced such violence, death was inevitable and the correspondent mocked Roper for his possession of healing powers or the ability to resurrect himself from the dead. The correspondent believed it was impossible for a man to beat another with such strength that he would be able to survive; his stories, like those instruments of torture, were fabricated and exaggerated in England. The repeated use of “Sambo” was a racial epithet to discredit Roper even further and cast him aside as an ignorant and lying fool, a stereotype that white Victorians were familiar with. Roper jeopardized his success on the British stage to act as a witness unrestricted by white control and attempted to present himself as an authentic formerly enslaved individual. Since abolition and Victorian society as a whole was codified and framed by whiteness, Roper’s bold language offended Victorian sensibilities and he did not present a

⁸⁷ Ibid. ⁸⁸ *Hampshire Advertiser and Salisbury Guardian*, July 6, 1839, 2.

⁸⁹ *Hampshire Advertiser and Salisbury Guardian*, July 13, 1839, 2.

narrative people were familiar with. As a result, his narrative was spurned and ridiculed for crossing the boundaries of authenticity.

The slander against Roper did not cease and *The Hampshire Advertiser and Salisbury Guardian* was livid at his continued lecturing tour in the South. Two weeks after this meeting, the correspondent was shocked his lectures were still attended by the public. “Moses Munchausen” was “reaping a rich harvest at the expense of the gullibility of John Bull” and offered the most insulting speech “delivered out of bedlam.” Roper defended himself against these charges at another meeting, and presumably attacked the newspaper for they issued a letter to Roper and demanded a retraction of his statements. The smear campaign was designed to hurt Roper’s reputation and to further add flame to the fire that he was a liar and an imposter. The reference to “bedlam” gave the impression Roper was mentally insane or incompetent and should be locked up in an institution so as not to prey on British public morality.⁹⁰

The newspaper evidently had a long memory, for two years later in 1841 they reported on another of Roper’s meetings when he returned to the South. The paper expressed its anger that a white American had recently lectured on antislavery in Poole but had little success compared to the “egregious Moses Roper.” The American gentleman did not possess “Birmingham-forged chains” to win over his gullible audience and the newspaper refused to believe Roper had been enslaved at all.⁹¹ Regardless of this criticism, Roper used his violent language and sharp wit to paint a vivid and horrifying picture of American slavery. His performative strategy of dissonance meant he was not prepared to downplay or conceal brutal punishments and was unconcerned about upsetting Victorian notions of gentility and decency.

Roper’s dissonant language threatened his successful employment of adaptive resistance and greatly influenced his experience in Britain. Using any means necessary, he employed different tactics to teach white audiences about the brutality of slavery. This, together with the lack of sustained support amid a white supremacist landscape and the constant recounting of his traumatic experiences, was a heavy burden to bear. In 1838, while he exhibited weapons of torture, Roper described how he could not “bear to hear the rattling of these chains” as though handling them brought him great pain and misery. In the same speech, he recounted how he heard a dog barking one night and suffered terrifying

⁹⁰ *Hampshire Advertiser and Salisbury Guardian*, July 27, 1839, 4.

⁹¹ *Hampshire Advertiser and Salisbury Guardian*, September 25, 1841, 5.

nightmares as he relived memories of failed escape attempts. He also described an incident where twenty-eight Black men decided to collectively commit mass suicide and jump into the Charleston River rather than be sold away from their families. Roper said he had "seen many slaves hang themselves; drown themselves, and cut their throats, but I never knew of anything (except parting with my own mother) that affected me so much as this."⁹² Roper forced himself to relive such intense trauma on the public stage, night after night, for the sole purpose of strengthening the antislavery movement. Such memories clearly damaged his psyche and threatened to envelop him in a sea of despair. His trauma was, at times, difficult to negotiate and perhaps it became near impossible to erect a masked performance and meet such antagonistic or skeptical audiences with measured oratory.

When Roper returned to British soil twenty years later in 1861, his trauma remained difficult to navigate. The local press in Wickhambrook reported that during his speech Roper's mind was clearly "recalled to far distant climes and painful memories" as he recounted the story of his escape.⁹³ Considering he depended on the sale of his narrative and his lecturing ability, Roper's trauma was presumably heightened by concerns for his mental but also financial survival. Reports of his visit in the late 1850s and early 1860s demonstrated a rising lack of interest to hear individual testimony. In July 1858 in Brigg, Lincolnshire, a local correspondent wrote that Roper "failed in eliciting the sympathies of the Brigg people, as not more than a dozen were in attendance during the evening. After waiting a considerable time, he delivered his lecture. Both Mr. Roper and his subject are stale."⁹⁴ Roper's desire to speak the truth about his traumatic experience to thousands of people across the decades (including to those expressing disinterest in places like Brigg) had clearly taken its toll. When Roper returned to America, he continued to lecture sporadically, but was forced to work on a farm to earn money, until he was too exhausted to carry on. In 1891, his unconscious body was found at a train station in Boston, wrapped in several layers to protect himself from the cold. He died in the hospital, with his loyal dog Pete by his side.⁹⁵

⁹² *The Leicestershire Mercury and General Advertiser for the Midland Counties*, May 19, 1838, 2.

⁹³ *The Bury and Norwich Post and Suffolk Herald*, March 12, 1861, 2-3.

⁹⁴ *The Lincoln, Rutland, and Stamford Mercury*, July 16, 1858, 5.

⁹⁵ *Boston Daily Globe*, April 16, 1891, 1.

Roper's lecturing tours were not conventionally successful when measured against the theory of adaptive resistance. He self-consciously performed in contested public spaces, but had to manage his intrusions into private spheres of influence: when Price lambasted him for allegedly renegeing on his promise to become a missionary, the tense barrier between private and public affairs threatened his success and future career. Comparing Roper to Douglass also proves to be an intriguing case study. Douglass was positively lionized by British audiences and through his Garrisonian networks he had numerous friends to help organize (and pay for) antislavery meetings. While at times Douglass employed graphic language to describe slavery (and subsequently did receive criticism), he was unafraid of compromise and adapted to each location and controversy with relative ease. Roper's employment of adaptive resistance was unbalanced because of his deliberate decision to rely on dissonant strategies such as his graphic descriptions of slavery, subversive humor, and dissonant eye-witnessing. Nevertheless, he forged his own path to survive in an often hostile and racist environment. In every situation, whether publicly or privately, Roper resolved to recount his experience of slavery. His bold declaration of "I shall tell the truth" together with his extensive canvassing of Britain was a precedent that future African Americans like Douglass would build on. Chapters 2 and 3 focus on Douglass' British sojourn between 1845 and 1847, and how his ardent belief in the power of print culture shaped his relationship with performance and abolitionist networks.⁹⁶

⁹⁶ *The Leeds Mercury*, July 6, 1894, 3.