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"We Need the Storm, the Whirlwind, the Earthquake": The Intersection of Language and Violence in Nat Turner's "Confessions" and Frederick Douglass's *My Bondage and My Freedom*

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“WE NEED THE STORM, THE WHIRLWIND, THE EARTHQUAKE”:

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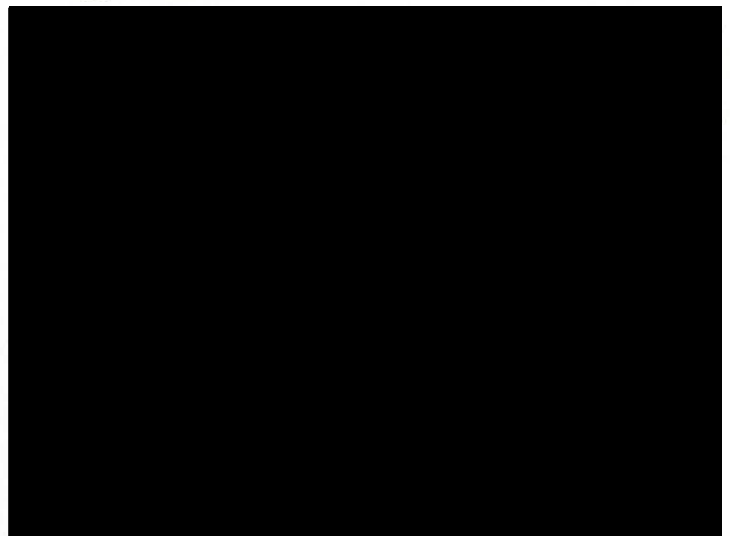
by

Allison Lane Tharp

A Thesis

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ABSTRACT

“WE NEED THE STORM, THE WHIRLWIND, THE EARTHQUAKE”:

THE INTERSECTION OF LANGUAGE AND VIOLENCE IN

NAT TURNER’S “CONFESSIONS” AND FREDERICK

DOUGLASS’S *MY BONDAGE AND MY FREEDOM*

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Resistance literature is an established genre, dating back to the late eighteenth century, but it underwent a rhetorical revision as slavery increased within the United States in the years leading up to the Civil War. As slaves and free blacks began to rebel against their oppressed condition, they “stole” two prominent tools whites used to oppress slaves: language and violence. Frederick Douglass’s *My Bondage and My Freedom* is a self-conscious revision within resistance literature that argues for national change by advocating physical violence with written language. Reading this text as an intertext with Nat Turner’s “Confessions” reveals the ways in which Douglass reappropriates the “stolen” slave’s voice and works to further abolition in the antebellum era.

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CHAPTER I

“WE NEED THE STORM, THE WHIRLWIND, THE EARTHQUAKE”:

THE INTERSECTION OF LANGUAGE AND VIOLENCE IN

NAT TURNER’S “CONFESSIONS” AND FREDERICK

DOUGLASS’S *MY BONDAGE AND MY FREEDOM*

In 1829, amidst increasing cultural discord over slavery, a free, northern black man named David Walker pleaded with both enslaved and free blacks to “kill or be killed” (30). His pamphlet, “Walker's Appeal, in Four Articles; Together with a Preamble, to the Coloured Citizens of the World, but in Particular, and Very Expressly, to Those of the United States of America, Written in Boston, State of Massachusetts, September 28, 1829,” attempted to enlighten America about the evils of slavery and implored the nation to take action against this “peculiar institution.” Walker hoped all blacks would have access to this pamphlet: “It is expected that all coloured men, women and children, of every nation, language and tongue under heaven, will try to procure a copy of this Appeal and read it, or get some one to read it to them, for it is designed more particularly for them” (Title Page Verso). Walker’s *Appeal* is representative of an antebellum literature in which blacks are implored to act through both language and physical violence. Walker engages many rhetorical tools that would become essential techniques of resistance literature to follow, including but not limited to a melding of religion and violence. According to Walker’s religious rhetoric, God himself sanctions the use of violence in the fight against slavery, and will provide a “Hannibal” who will deliver blacks from their enslaved state: “The person whom God shall give you,” Walker commands, “give him your support and let him go his length, and behold in him the

salvation of your God. I charge you this day before my God to lay no obstacle in his way, but let him go" (23).

In an era in which white slaveholders advocated the good of slavery through religious rhetoric, impeded the education of slaves, and maintained order amongst the enslaved with violent means, Walker's *Appeal* can be seen as appropriating three prominent tools that whites used to subjugate blacks: language, violence, and religion. Finally, Walker's document functions to instill terror in the white slaveholder who would read it: "The Americans may be as vigilant as they please, but they cannot be vigilant enough for the Lord, neither can they hide themselves, where he will not find and bring them out" (86). Walker here is essentially turning God against white slaveholders, disrupting the view that slavery was a Christian institution. In calling upon the enslaved to act and in using rhetorical appeals to incite fear in slaveholding whites, Walker's *Appeal* helped to expose the increasing dissonance between whites and blacks, and between slavery advocates and abolitionists leading up to the Civil War.

David Walker's *Appeal* belongs to a tradition of resistance literature dating back to the late eighteenth century, but it marks the nascent movement of the antebellum era in which blacks began to recognize and fight against their inferior status by appropriating the white-owned tools of language and violence. In general, black resistance literature that preceded Walker attempted to appeal to whites' sensibilities and moral nature, pleading with them to recognize the error of slavery and to restore the country to the land of equality it promised to be. Walker revises this tradition by exposing the evils that whites have committed rather than imploring whites to reconsider their positions and arguing for the use of physical force. Thus, in the antebellum era, one characteristic of

resistance literature is that it uses language to argue for physical violence in the name of protest and, as the era continued, this language became more militant.

Resistance literature can be seen as a very self-conscious genre. In other words, resistance writers have a wealth of preceding material to draw upon, and this becomes rhetorically obvious when studying the genre as a whole. In his compilation of black protest pamphlets, Richard Newman claims that “print carried black voices through space and time: space, so that a broader national community of black leaders and white citizens could see African-American arguments; and time, so that subsequent generations of black as well as white readers could refer back to African-American documents” (4).¹ The shift from orality to print allowed blacks to disseminate information to a wider audience, and this print immortalized their words so that future reformers could draw upon them. Resistance literature in the antebellum period became an increasingly self-conscious genre, one perpetually revising itself to fit the needs of a rapidly changing society. And, as the fight between slavery and abolition grew more militant, so did black resistance and the literature advocating it.

Newman focuses his study solely on the pamphlet genre, particularly arguing that prominent collections of black writing from the antebellum era ignore this genre and concentrate primarily on slave narratives. While Newman’s point is valid, I suggest revising the way slave narratives are read. Instead of viewing slave narratives as simply testimonials to identity and existence, I argue that these narratives should be read as part

¹ While Newman writes about “protest literature,” for the purposes of this paper, I include “protest” under the blanket label “resistance literature.” The term resistance literature refers to literature written to expose and/or change the current cultural conditions of a particular time period. For two recent studies on resistance literature, see Richard Newman’s *Pamphlets of Protest: An Anthology of Early African American Protest Literature, 1790-1860* (2001); and Zoe Trodd’s *American Protest Literature* (2006). For a classic study, see Upton Sinclair’s edited compilation *The Cry for Justice: An Anthology of the Literature of Social Protest* (1915).

of the resistance literature genre, exposing and attempting to change unequal relations between blacks and whites. Frederick Douglass's *My Bondage and My Freedom* is one such slave narrative that transcends its genre and makes an argument for American social and racial upheaval, and further, redefines resistance literature as a more inclusive genre.

This thesis works to examine Douglass's shifting attitudes toward violence as a form of resistance by examining his work in the context of resistance literature in general, and of Nat Turner's "Confessions" more particularly.² A key figure in the fight against slavery, Douglass began his career as an advocate of nonresistance, but drastically revised his views and his rhetorical strategies throughout his life toward an advocacy of violence in the fight for abolition and equal rights. As the culture surrounding slavery grew more contentious throughout the nineteenth century, so too did Douglass; this shift can be seen primarily through the revisions made in Douglass's second autobiography *My Bondage and My Freedom* (1855/2003). Turner's inclusion within the genre of resistance literature is more contested, as I will later suggest, due to the ambiguous authorship of his "Confessions" (1831). However, his act of physical resistance—the slave rebellion he organized and carried out in 1831—undeniably acted as fodder for resistance literature in the antebellum period and for Douglass's own thinking about violent resistance and its relation to language. Reading these two works as intertexts reveals how resistance literature as a genre has evolved, and how Douglass's *My Bondage and My Freedom* reappropriates language to work in favor of the enslaved.

Reading Douglass's work in the context of resistance literature and Turner's "Confessions" can shed light on the ways in which Douglass's paradigms of resistance

² In Robert Levine's edited version of William Wells Brown's *Clotel*, he includes "The Confessions of Nat Turner" under Thomas Gray's authorship (the attorney who interviewed Turner and published "The Confessions"); for the purposes of this thesis, I will follow Levine's lead.

shift and change. The revisions Douglass undertook in *My Bondage and My Freedom*—revisions, as I will argue, shaped in part by Turner’s precursor “Confessions”—expose Douglass’s eventual insistence that slaves’ physical violence can only engender change when words and language act in its service.³ When we view Douglass as a conscious creator of his own self-image, and as keenly aware of his cultural and historical surroundings, we see that he is cognizant of how black resistance can be appropriated. Douglass’s self-conscious revision of his own voice and of resistance literature more generally alters this condition of appropriation. By reappropriating the *stolen* slave’s voice, Douglass fuses language with violence and his text works to further abolition in the antebellum time period.

The control whites executed over violence, language, and literacy was an immensely powerful weapon in the proslavery arsenal. In preventing the acquisition of literacy and the ability to act physically, white slave owners succeeded in disenfranchising blacks and rendering them unable to protest or resist their enslaved status. In the antebellum South, white slaveholders asserted a kind of ownership over violence, and the use or threat of violence worked as a tool of oppression against slaves. Throughout slave narratives, we become privy to countless acts of brutal violence enacted by whites against blacks; in fact, such acts are a quintessential characteristic of slave narratives. Frederick Douglass notes, “I was whipped, either with sticks or cowskins, every week. Aching bones and a sore back were my constant companions” (157). William Wells Brown describes the whip frequently used to beat slaves: “The

³ Many critics praise Douglass’s *Narrative* as his finest autobiography, but certain representative scholars advocate reading *My Bondage and My Freedom*. As Eric Sundquist claims, “*My Bondage and My Freedom* tells us far more about Douglass’s life as a slave, and about slave culture generally, than does the *Narrative* . . .” (89). As my discussion will later indicate, I am interested in the *Narrative* for how it is a text Douglass revises.

handle was about three feet long, with the butt-end filled with lead, and the lash six or seven feet in length, made of cowhide, with platted wire on the end of it" (377-78).

Finally, Harriet Jacobs documents a scene of particularly graphic violence in her autobiography, writing of a slave who "was cut with the whip from his head to his feet, then washed with strong brine, to prevent the flesh from mortifying, and make it heal further than it otherwise would" (794-95). She goes on to say that the slave's "dead body was found partly eaten by rats and vermin" (795). These examples bear witness to the frequency of violence used against slaves, often in response to the slightest of offenses. As Dickson D. Bruce, Jr. claims "the narratives' authors invariably presented episodes in which even the most diligent efforts on the part of the slaves were met with cruel violence as the slaveholder seized upon the most trivial shortcomings as pretexts for 'punishment'" (39). Slave owners, the narratives suggest, were able to maintain control over their slaves simply because the master could whip, and the slave could not resist, even if in defense.

Further, this ownership of violence is implicit within antebellum society, so much so that white slaveholders own, control, and wield not only the *means*, but also the very *idea* of violence. In her treatment of tropes of sympathy and manhood in *My Bondage and My Freedom*, Elizabeth Barnes explains that the violence that eventually allows Douglass to transcend his status as slave does not initially belong to him: "it belongs to his master and possible father, Aaron Anthony, whose whipping of a black woman Douglass witnesses and which becomes for Douglass both emblematic of slavery and a means of his escape from it" (242). Being born into slavery, and witnessing the brutal beating of his aunt Esther at a young age, Douglass is quick to learn that his master

controls violence. Barnes goes on to claim that, within slavery, “sympathy and identification can become psychological weapons used against the beholder” (242).

While violence, sympathy, and identification do not initially strike one as powers to be owned, slavery transforms these ideas into *weapons*—weapons which, in an era of black disenfranchisement, whites own.

The mental toll of the violence slaves were forced to endure was perhaps more damaging than the physical trauma. Violence by whites not only disempowered slaves, but it also dehumanized them. As Douglass explains in his autobiography *My Bondage and My Freedom*: “Mr. Covey succeeded in breaking me. I was broken in body soul and spirit. My natural elasticity was crushed; my intellect languished; the disposition to read departed; the cheerful spark that lingered around my eye died; the dark night of slavery closed in upon me; and behold a man transformed into a brute!” (160). Just as Douglass was to break in the oxen in an earlier scene, so Mr. Covey breaks Douglass. Here we see a black man being equated with an animal, and this transformation from human to beast renders him powerless in attempting to change his status in life because, as a “brute,” he lacks both intellectual and spiritual power. The militant abolitionist and minister Henry Highland Garnet notes the abuse and violence so ubiquitously surrounding slavery when he claims, “your sternest energies have been beaten out upon the anvil of severe trial. Slavery has done this, to make you subservient, to its own purposes; ... if you meet with pain, sorrow and even death, these are the common lot of slaves” (62). Violence enacted against blacks renders them subservient, and this subservience makes them unable to question the motives of the white slaveholder. This inability to question perpetuates their existence as brutes, unable to strive for their freedom and, more importantly, unable even

to see the “hellish chains of slavery” upon them (Walker 13). Further, the act of dehumanization makes violent action not only more acceptable in the minds of whites, but also increases its frequency of use.

“Both force and enforced illiteracy,” Thad Ziolkowski explains, “were employed against slaves and, as techniques of oppression, bore comparable burdens” (151). While whites control physical force, they also control the social force necessary to keep slaves uneducated. The idea of “enforced illiteracy” alludes to the slaveholder’s belief that, once educated, slaves would no longer accept their position as chattel. In both the *Narrative in the Life of Frederick Douglass an American Slave* (1845) and *My Bondage and My Freedom* (MBMF), Douglass demonstrates the panicked reaction of his white master when he learns Douglass has begun learning to read. While living in Baltimore, Douglass is taught to read by his mistress, Sophia Auld. In learning what his wife is doing, Mr. Auld claims, “if you give a nigger an inch, he will take an ell; he should know nothing but the will of his master, and learn to obey it” (MBMF 108). For Auld, as for many white slave owners, knowledge and literacy would cause a slave to question his position and rebel against it. Hearing these words from his master’s mouth impacted Douglass immensely. He claims that “his iron sentences [...] stirred up not only my feelings into a sort of rebellion, but awakened within me a slumbering train of vital thought” (MBMF 109). He goes on: “I understood the direct pathway from slavery to freedom. ... *He* wanted me to be a *slave*. ... That which he most loved I hated; and the very determination which he expressed to keep me in ignorance, only rendered me the more resolute in seeking intelligence” (MBMF 109). In this logical formulation, Douglass gives his reader a step-by-step guide to attaining freedom—find out what white men *do not* want you to

know, and learn it. This example not only demonstrates the need for white slaveholders to maintain their control of written language, but also the damage literacy might do to the institution of slavery. If slaves steal the tools of oppression so blatantly used against them, they thereby obtain an equal, if not dominant position over their master. They can then use language to fight against language.

Despite the seemingly rigid, unchangeable state of relations between white slaveholders and enslaved blacks, appeals to resistance were sounded from a variety of locations and from a variety of perspectives. While David Walker uses language to call the enslaved to violent action, the most prominent call to resistance was one steeped not in physical militancy but rather in moral suasion. William Lloyd Garrison, publisher of the abolitionist newspaper *The Liberator*, advocated a type of abolition that maintained pacifism while still attempting to expose slavery for the evil institution it was.⁴ As Margaret Kohn points out, “nonresistance required that people respond to wrongdoing with persuasion and avoid recourse to violence, even in self-defense. Strict adherents to the philosophy of nonresistance were even opposed to nonviolent uses of force such as government action” (501).⁵ Here we see that, for abolitionists in the vein of moral suasion, words are valued over violence.

Early in his career, Frederick Douglass figured prominently in the moral suasion abolitionist movement. Indeed, Garrison was his mentor, employing him and even writing one of the testimonials for his autobiographical *Narrative*. Many critics have

⁴ Interestingly, though he advocates nonviolent action in the name of abolition, Garrison’s rhetoric *sounds* incredibly violent: “I *will be* as harsh as truth, and as uncompromising as justice. ... I am in earnest—I will not equivocate—I will not excuse—I will not retreat a single inch—AND I WILL BE HEARD” (Levine 446; italics and emphasis in original).

⁵ For the purposes of this paper, I use “moral suasion” and “nonresistance” interchangeably.

written about Douglass's shift from moral suasion to the advocacy of physical violence as a way to engender change, and this shift is representative of a national shift as well. As the numbers of enslaved people increased in the years leading up to the Civil War, "doubling between the 1830s and 1860s," the nation began to split and abolitionists began to veer closer to the side of violent action rather than passive communication (Newman 12). Moral suasion had an undeniable impact on abolition in that it exposed the evils of slavery to a large audience, and thereby garnered greater support. As a result, it also worked to further polarize the nation and, ironically, to propel it to a more violent paradigm. As the anti-slavery movement grew stronger, so too did the pro-slavery movement, leading to often violent clashes.

Certain events gave rise to this national shift from moral suasion to violence. In *Righteous Violence*, Larry J. Reynolds documents the ways in which seven prominent authors of the Civil War time period responded to and ambivalently condoned violence as a means to an end. In his historical overview of the time period, Reynolds discusses the polarization of the nation in response to moral suasion. Garrison himself received death threats from both southerners and northerners, and was attacked by a mob in 1835. Further, anti-abolition mobs targeted both abolitionists and blacks, and, according to Reynolds, "[moral suasion abolitionists] provoked mobs that attacked their speakers as well as mobs that attacked free blacks" (13).⁶ Thus, while moral suasion and nonresistance did do much to propel the nation toward a time when a decision *had* to be made about slavery, it also polarized the nation to the point at which violence could no longer be ignored. "In the years ahead," Reynolds observes, "as the agitation over slavery

⁶ For a more detailed discussion of these mob attacks, see Reynolds (12-17).

grew in intensity, [prominent authors of the time period] would find themselves pondering over the use of violence to free the slaves in the United States” (2).⁷ This agitation over slavery, and the violence surrounding it, was enacted by both pro-slavery groups and slaves themselves. While some slaves enacted non-violent, day-to-day resistance,⁸ others revolted violently, generating death and destruction in the name of freedom.

In the ten years between his two autobiographies, Douglass’s expressed views on abolition shifted from advocating nonresistance to advocating violence, and this becomes obvious in his rhetorical strategy. In an 1846 speech given in London, Douglass states, “such is my regard for the principle of peace; such is my deep firm conviction that nothing can be attained for liberty universally by war, that were I to be asked the question whether I would have my emancipation by the shedding of a single drop of blood, my answer would be the negative” (qtd. in Kohn 502). In 1846, then, Douglass appears to be fully entrenched in Garrisonian moral suasion. This mindset, however, would quickly be revised. As critics have suggested, a confluence of events influenced Douglass’s shift from pacifism to violence, but three main events emerge as primary causes: his sojourn in England once he escaped slavery, his break with Garrison, and his relationship with John

⁷ This brings up an interesting trend seen in poetry of the Civil War time period: for prominent poets, like Whitman and Melville, the Civil War—or, more generally, the violent nature of the war—*had* to occur in order to rid the nation of slavery. Several poems in Whitman’s *Drum Taps* and Melville’s *Battle-Pieces and Aspects of the War* testify to these views. See, for example, Whitman’s “Song of the Banner at Daybreak” and Melville’s “The Portent,” as well as Melville’s *Supplement to Battle-Pieces and Aspects of the War*.

⁸ As Marable and Mullings claim, “instead of violent confrontations, many used other tactics to harm and disrupt the business of daily life” (4). From “deliberate work slowdowns” to the practice of contraception and infanticide, there were many instances of non-violent and clandestine resistance by blacks toward white slave holders (4).

Brown, formed in 1847. These three life events appear to figure prominently in Douglass's shift toward a more militant and violent form of abolitionism.

While much biographical information exists on both Douglass's time spent in London and his break with Garrison, there seems to be less emphasis on his relationship with Brown and the effect it had on Douglass. In his study *The Black Hearts of Men*, John Stauffer documents the relationship between Douglass and Brown and details Douglass's involvement in Brown's Harpers Ferry raid in 1859, twelve years into their friendship. As he explains, Brown wrote his "Provisional Constitution" during a two-week stay at Douglass's home. "Douglass thought so highly" of the document, claims Stauffer, "that he kept an original copy until the end of his life" (247). Though he did not take an active part in Brown's raid against the federal arsenal in Virginia, Douglass nonetheless supported Brown's plan (Stauffer 247). Further, as Kohn suggests, "in the *Life and Times of Frederick Douglass*, Douglass emphasized the influence of John Brown, noting that after their meeting he became less hopeful about the peaceful abolition of slavery and his 'utterances became more tinged by the color of this man's strong impressions'" (501). Considering Brown's militant and radical stand against slavery, it appears reasonable to assume that Douglass's views would take on a more violent quality partially because of Brown's influence.

While many cultural events molded Douglass's shift from pacifism to violence—his experiences with slavery, his life in England, his relationships with Garrison and Brown, among others—it is certain that Douglass was interested in, an advocate of, and influenced by slave revolts and insurrections. Notable slave rebellions in the antebellum era include, but are not limited to those by: Toussaint L'Ouverture (1791), Gabriel

Prosser (1800), Denmark Vesey (1822), Nat Turner (1831), Madison Washington (1841), and John Brown (1859).⁹ By 1845, the year Douglass's first autobiography was published, all but one of these many slave rebellions had already occurred. As a reader of *The Liberator* and a participant in the antislavery movement, Douglass would have been well aware of them. Douglass's interest in slave revolts is evident, for example, in his 1853 novella "The Heroic Slave," a text which condones Madison Washington's slave revolt aboard the slave-ship *The Creole*.¹⁰ In an 1848 speech to the New England Antislavery Society in Boston, Douglass championed the actions of previous slave rebels and urged northerners to aid in the abolition of slavery:

Would you do but this, oh, men of the North, I know there is a spirit among the slaves which would not much longer brook their degradation and their bondage. There are many Madison Washingtons and Nathaniel Turners in the South, who would assert their rights to liberty, if you would take your feet from their necks, and your sympathy and aid from their oppressors. (qtd. in French 80)

The link that Douglass makes between Washington and Turner here is significant. Just as he represents Washington as noble and heroic, so too does he represent the even more controversial Turner as such. According to Scot French, "Douglass depicted [Nat] Turner as a heroic figure—'a noble, brave, and generous soul—patient, disinterested, and fearless of suffering'—in the tradition of the American Founding Fathers" (80). And indeed, in Douglass's speeches and writings of the time period, he adopts a revolutionary

⁹ Though free and white, Brown's ultimate goal was to incite a slave rebellion in the state of Virginia.

¹⁰ While there is not enough space for a detailed discussion of Douglass's novella in this thesis, for more information see Stauffer (190-194), Reynolds (85-111), or Weinauer.

ethos intended to rouse sympathy for abolition, and to recruit “fellow travelers” (Fine 236). This “spirit” among the slaves that urges them to “assert their rights to liberty” directly recalls Thomas Jefferson’s “Declaration of Independence”—an allusion to which Douglass’s northern, white audience would have been receptive.

Describing Turner as “noble,” “brave,” “generous,” “patient,” “disinterested,” and “fearless,” and invoking the founding fathers when speaking about him and other slave rebels, Douglass demonstrates respect and awe for Turner as a heroic figure (qtd. in French 80). But it is also apparent, I would argue, that Turner’s legacy is one that Douglass seeks, to some extent, to revise. Indeed, I submit that Douglass revises *My Bondage and My Freedom* with Turner’s “Confessions” in mind. In both Turner’s and Douglass’s acts of violence, language is the determining force in whether, and how, physical violence can engender change within society. But where Turner’s “Confessions” fails to attribute voice and force to the slave, Douglass’s *My Bondage and My Freedom* succeeds, primarily due to Douglass’s conscious self-fashioning and revisionary rhetorical choices.

In August of 1831, Turner and a group of slaves killed roughly sixty whites in a two-day span. Turner was captured in October and put to death in November of that same year. This rebellion produced more than bloodshed, however. In his published confession, Turner instills fear in the minds of slaveholding whites. When questioned about the possibility of subsequent slave revolts, Turner claims, “can you not think the same ideas, and strange appearances about this time in heaven’s might prompt others, as well as myself, to this undertaking?” (Gray 440). Wading through Turner’s convoluted rhetoric in this response allows the reader to come to a simple understanding: though

Turner may not know of other impending slave revolts, these revolts could occur easily, prompted by either ideas or religion. "Heaven's" "strange appearances" are accessible to all—not simply to Turner himself—and though he has been captured and put to death, there are countless other slaves who may be in possession of these "same ideas." In this instance and in others throughout his confession, we see Turner trying to continue the work he began with his rebellion: namely, he has reversed the typical roles of slave and slave owner. By killing whites with their own weapons, and using the rhetorical tactic of fear of God in his confession, Turner effectively terrorizes white slaveholders. They must live in fear of their slaves, never feeling quite as secure in their control over the instruments of violence and the rhetoric surrounding slavery. Further, Turner engages in the Walker-esque technique of backing his violence with a religious foundation: as he claims, "I surely would be a prophet, as the lord had shewn me things that had happened before my birth" (Gray 430). Further, "I was ordained for some great purpose in the hands of the Almighty" (Gray 431). Turner has become the Lord's "Hannibal," fulfilling Walker's prophesy that the Lord would give the enslaved a figure who would fight for their freedom.

While Turner indeed resisted white oppression, the response to his insurrection in South Hampton could be interpreted as ultimately damaging to his cause. As a result of his rebellion, many innocent blacks were killed in an attempt to bring justice down upon Turner and his followers. As Stephen B. Oates explains, "white vigilantes—and some militiamen—had gone on a rampage, shooting and axing every Negro they could find, women and children included" (99). Oates goes on to claim that "some of these whites were boiling mad and wanted to avenge the atrocities they had found ... but others joined

the carnage out of sheer racial hatred" (99). Oates's choices of words—"vigilantes," "rampage," "boiling," "carnage," and "hatred"—succinctly describes the contentious state of affairs in the two months between the insurrection and Turner's capture. Turner's rebellion, then, while at once "smashing the prevailing stereotype of master-slave relations," was not without its deadly and dire consequences for many innocent blacks in the South (Oates 105).

Like Turner, but in a much more limited and individual context, Frederick Douglass engages in acts of violence—in particular, violence against the slave-breaker Covey—to engender change. The story of Douglass's fight with Covey is a familiar one: subjected to six months of brutal beatings, inadequate living conditions, and inhumane labor, one last beating by Covey sends Douglass to the brink of death and incites in him a resolve to stand up in the face of danger and fight off his assailant: "whence came the daring spirit necessary to grapple with a man, who eight-and-forty hours before, could, with his slightest word have made me tremble like a leaf in a storm, I do not know; at any rate, *I was resolved to fight*" (*MBMF* 177, italics in original). This fight endows Douglass with a sense of manhood and humanity; so much so that he and Covey become equals. As Douglass claims, it was "as though we stood as equals before the law. The very color of the man was forgotten" (*MBMF* 177). Here we see that by appropriating the means of violence over which Covey previously exercised control and ownership, Douglass becomes his equal and is able to use the physical force and oppression against the man who once used it against him. As Margaret Kohn points out, before his fight, "Douglass felt himself to be the equal of Covey but this reality was not reflected back to him. The fight with Covey changed this reality, establishing a sort of equality of physical force"

(504).¹¹ Had Douglass refused to resist the blows of his master, he would have continued to be less than human, a mere animal and brute controlled by his master, with no ability to change his physical or psychological status in life.

Whatever its source, his resolve to fight proved successful for Douglass, and as a close reading of this scene suggests, not only is Douglass rendered psychologically free from the shackles of slavery, but Covey is also demoted from his prominent standing as a confident and powerful slaveholder to the status of the fearful brute once inhabited by Douglass himself. As Douglass recounts, “the brute was endeavoring skillfully to get a slip-knot on my legs” (*MBMF* 177); further, “my resistance was entirely unexpected, and Covey was taken all aback by it, for he trembled in every limb” (*MBMF* 178); and finally, “Covey seemed to have lost his usual strength and coolness. He was frightened, and stood puffing and blowing, seemingly unable to command words or blows” (*MBMF* 178). Here, as the text shows, Douglass’s use of violence and resistance reverses the given role of “master” and “slave,” transforming Covey into a “trembl[ing]” “brute,” unable to use violence or words to defend himself. The idea that Covey cannot conjure words to use in his own defense is further reinforcement of the idea that he now occupies the slave’s position instead of the master’s. Covey cannot “command words or blows” like a slaveholder should because Douglass has stolen these tools from his white master.

Both Turner and Douglass enacted physical violence against white slaveholders and supporters of slavery, but there are significant differences between these instances of violence and their effectiveness in promoting abolition. Though Douglass’s *Narrative* depicts the fight in a way that appears to advance only his *own* emancipation, *My Bondage and My Freedom* makes a move toward advancing the larger cause of abolition.

¹¹ For a detailed reading of Douglass’s “resolve,” see Kohn (510-513).

This move, I will suggest, is in contrast with Turner's "Confessions." Arguably even more damaging to Turner's cause than the "carnage" of whites' "sheer racial hatred" (Oates 99) is the intervention of Thomas Gray, the attorney appointed to defend four of Turner's co-conspirators, though not Turner himself. In his seminal work on black and white culture within America, *To Wake the Nations* (1993), Eric J. Sundquist ultimately argues that Turner can be seen as in control of his own text. As he claims, "the intense wave of paranoia and panic among slaveholders set off by Turner's uprising was motivated in largest part, of course, by the shocking bloodshed of the event. But the immediate availability of Gray's pamphlet gave Turner's own words a role in continuing his insurrection in the arena of propaganda" (43). For Sundquist, and critics like him, Turner was able to continue his insurrection through the words of his "Confessions." However, by closely examining the "Confessions" and Gray's role in the document, it becomes obvious that Gray's textual and linguistic intervention into Turner's confession works not only to contain Turner's "continuing [...] insurrection," but also to utilize the "arena of propaganda" to suppress Turner's revolt. Further, by framing and containing Turner's violence, Gray counteracts the fear Turner's "Confessions" would instill in white slave owners if the actual confession was read separately from Gray's commentary on it.

Thomas Gray's textual intervention in Turner's "Confessions" performs two primary roles: first, it works to alleviate fear of future slave revolts by portraying Turner as a fanatic, and second, it diminishes the effect of Turner's physical violence by linguistically containing it and, in so doing, reestablishes order and white control. The idea of containment raises an interesting paradox: while, on the one hand, Gray is

containing Turner's insurrection and diminishing its results through his textual intervention of the violent event, on the other hand, Gray is producing this document for publication and widespread dissemination. As we will see, however, far from allowing Turner to continue his insurrection by striking fear of future slave revolts in the minds of white readers, Gray's act of publication in fact disseminates his *containment* of Turner to the wide public. In short, Gray's document works less as a true confession—one in which the soon-to-be-executed can portray his last living thoughts to an audience—but instead works as a way of silencing Turner. Gray appears to give Turner a voice, but in reality, he suppresses Turner's last possible way to communicate to the public.

Gray constructs "The Confessions of Nat Turner" as a four part document: first, Gray's introduction; second, Turner's confession; third, Gray's commentary; and fourth, the trial proceedings. Gray's introduction is rife with descriptions of Turner and his followers as demonic. Gray employs phrases like "diabolical actors," "ferocious band," "gloomy fanatic," "dark, bewildered, and overwrought mind," "remorseless murderers," "bloody proceedings," "hellish purposes," and "ferocious miscreants" (427-428). Descriptions like these justify the revengeful response to Turner's insurrection and draw readers in with language that would elicit a strong emotional response. Besides depicting Turner and his followers as generally demonic, Gray concentrates on Turner himself. He displays him as a religious fanatic, overcome by his delusional imagination and prompted to perform his insurrection because of his fanaticism. Toward the end of his introduction, Gray successfully sets the stage for Turner's confession, but he preemptively defines the confession as the ravings of a fanatic lunatic, and the revolt as an example of a singular event:

[The confession] reads an awful, and it is hoped, a useful lesson, as to the operations of a mind like his, endeavoring to grapple with things beyond its reach. How it first became bewildered and confounded, and finally corrupted and led to the conception and perpetration of the most atrocious and heart-rending deeds. (429)

With the phrase “a mind like his,” Gray is presenting Turner as different from other slaves—whereas the majority of enslaved blacks do not “grapple with things beyond [their] reach,” Turner is “bewildered,” “confounded,” and “corrupted” simply because he has “grappled” with ideas not *meant* for slaves. Gray’s introduction, then, separates Turner from his co-conspirators, and the document as a whole takes on the form of a case study: Gray, the legal professional, presents Turner’s confessions not for the purposes of communicating Turner’s message, but rather to present a carefully constructed image of Turner as a deranged mind, operating on his own, to his white readership.

At the time of Gray’s publication, the main concern that arose was about the veracity of the document. According to French, “declaring the pamphlet ‘deeply interesting,’ the editors of the *Richmond Inquirer* nevertheless questioned the accuracy of Gray’s transcription” (50). Despite the inability to know for sure if the document was unaltered, as Gray claimed, both anti-slavery and pro-slavery publications and individuals utilized the pamphlet to their own ends.¹² Thus, the veracity of the statement mattered then, and matters now, much less than the picture Gray created of Turner and his revolt. Sundquist claims that, “although Gray’s text serves to contain and suppress Turner’s revolt by situating it within a description of fanaticism, it does not obliterate the meaning

¹² Garrison, for example, was conflicted about Turner’s revolt. As Reynolds claims, “Garrison insisted that slave insurrections such as Turner’s were morally wrong and ineffectual. On the other hand, he extended understanding and sympathy to slaves who did revolt” (13). See Reynolds for a more detailed discussion.

of the revolt as an event or as a textual reflection on religious and political principles of liberation" (43). However, I would argue that it does, indeed, "obliterate" and diminish the "meaning" of Turner's insurrection, not only because Gray contains Turner and his revolt within racially charged language that white readers would respond to, but also because he differentiates Turner from other slaves, thereby relieving his white audience of their fear. In continuing his case study of Turner, after a transcription (often interrupted by Gray's own asides) of Turner's "Confessions," Gray adds a concluding response to the confession in a way that further positions Turner as an abnormal slave. In countering the idea that Turner is ignorant, Gray claims, "he certainly never had the advantages of education, but he can read and write, (it was taught to him by his parents,) and for natural intelligence and quickness of apprehension, is surpassed by few men I have ever seen" (441). Though upon first reading this appears to be a defense of Turner's character, Gray is very strategically alleviating the fear of whites during this time period and further proving that Turner's insurrection was an anomaly. Considering the previously discussed ideas of literacy and the fact that slaves had to appropriate literacy from white "ownership" and "control," Gray demonstrates how Turner represents a small class of enslaved blacks who are literate. Again, then, Gray contains Turner's insurrection textually, just as Turner is physically contained in the prison house, and he furthers slavery's grip on slaves by implying that the answer to preventing future slave revolts is simple: all a slaveholder needs to do, Gray seems to postulate, is keep his slaves ignorant. Turner's insurrection, then, was an accident due to the dwindling vigilance of his white masters—had he never learned to read, Gray implicitly argues, Turner's revolt may never have happened. Thus, white fear is again alleviated.

Gray's containment of Turner's "Confessions" bolsters the South's belief in slavery as an institution and can be seen as a precursor for prominent pro-slavery rhetoric in the years following Turner's insurrection. A direct example of Gray's influence on other pro-slavery writers arises when one studies Gray's document alongside professor and pro-slavery activist Thomas R. Dew's "Review of the Debate in the Virginia Legislature" (1832). Dew presents enslaved blacks as ultimately content in their positions: "[The slave's] ambition is to excel all his fellow slaves in the performance of his servile duties—to please and gratify his master—and to command the praise of all who witness his exertions" (370). In his argument, "servile duties," "pleas[ing] and gratify[ing] his master," and receiving praise for "his exertions" are all a slave needs to be content with his or her life. It is only when the slave is *told* that "his situation is degrading and his lot a miserable one" that his "happiness and his usefulness" is destroyed (Dew 370). As Dew asserts, "let [the wily philanthropist] but light up the dungeon in which he persuades the slave that he is caged—and at that moment, like the serpent that entered the garden of Eden, he destroys his happiness and his usefulness" (370). Many intriguing ideas emerge from Dew's rhetoric in this passage,¹³ but most important for this study is Dew's use of a rhetorical technique that also emerges in Gray's document: in these two formulations, and in many that would follow, slaves are portrayed as content, nonviolent, and subservient to their masters until outside forces act upon them. Thus, Gray's document diminishes the efficacy of Turner's revolt by categorizing

¹³ Consider his use of religious symbolism. In his formulation, persuading the slave that he lives his life encaged is connected directly to man's fall in the garden of Eden. In Eden, the serpent provided the temptation of knowledge, which is an awareness of one's place in the world. Thus, when the slave is similarly tempted with knowledge, he will realize his place in the world, thereby realizing his degraded condition. The "wily philanthropist," then, is the serpent. Further, the use of the word "persuade" alludes to the fact that, according to Dew, the slave is content to remain encaged. The "wily philanthropist" must *convince* the slave that he is, indeed, enslaved.

him as a fanatic, acting on his own, deranged volition, *and* it strengthens slavery's grip on the South and pro-slavery rhetoric, with Thomas Dew being only one example of Gray's influence.¹⁴ Gray's textual intervention, then, diminishes the effect of Turner's violence and renders it benign in engendering a move toward abolition.

Of course, Turner's insurrection had undeniable influence, on abolitionists as well as on slavery supporters. For radical abolitionists, Turner's revolt essentially legitimized the use of violence in the fight against slavery. But in a nation teetering on the edge of an irreparable split between those who condoned and those who condemned slavery, Turner's insurrection had what many would argue was an overwhelmingly negative impact on the support of abolition in the United States. In 1831-32, the Virginia Legislature debated the question of slavery. Before Turner's revolt, the state of Virginia was debating the possibility of either emancipation or colonization; after his insurrection, however, Virginia lawmakers and prominent citizens insisted overwhelmingly that the institution of slavery must remain intact within the state. According to Robert S. Levine, "this debate can be regarded as a critical turning point in proslavery thinking in the South, as formerly defensive supporters of slavery now began to adopt a more militant and aggressive posture on the centrality of slavery to Southern culture" (365). Therefore, though Turner's insurrection may have legitimized violence to those radical abolitionists, and though abolitionists into the future would utilize the image of Turner as a heroic figure, Gray's containment of his voice, and thereby the containment of his insurrection, overwhelmingly influenced the strengthening of slavery in the South.

¹⁴ Another interesting comparison with Gray and with Dew is Samuel A. Cartwright, a physician from New Orleans who theorized that if slaves misbehaved or ran away, it could be attributed to a disease of the body and mind. Called "dysaesthesia aethiopica," or "rascality" by masters, this disease is the "natural offspring of Negro liberty—the liberty to be idle, to wallow in filth, and to indulge in improper food and drinks" (Cartwright 392). Again, then, we see that blacks are only disobedient due to an outside cause.

Douglass was not always free from this containment. A common characteristic of slave narratives is a testimonial which precedes the body of the text and functions as validation for the story to follow and for the storywriter himself. In Douglass's 1845 *Narrative*, Garrison writes one of the two testimonials (the other is written by another white Garrisonian, Wendell Phillips). Though an abolitionist, Garrison's testimonial at times implicitly strengthens the cultural view of the time period that Douglass, like all blacks, is inferior to whites.¹⁵ By contrast, in 1855, James M'Cune Smith, a *black* abolitionist, writes the testimonial for Douglass's *My Bondage and My Freedom*. In this revisionary decision, Douglass seems to be countering the white intervention into his first narrative, and abandoning his white "handlers." Having a black abolitionist introduce *My Bondage and My Freedom* alerts the reader that Douglass is well aware of the possibility of appropriation, and is refusing to have his text appropriated by a white man, abolitionist or not.

Perhaps not surprisingly, then, another revision Douglass makes is to include references to Turner in *My Bondage and My Freedom*, references that do not exist in the *Narrative*. Douglass claims, "the insurrection of Nathaniel Turner had been quelled, but the alarm and terror had not subsided. The cholera was on its way, and the thought was present, that God was angry with the white people because of their slaveholding wickedness, and, therefore, his judgments were abroad in the land" (*MBMF* 122). In his formulation, Douglass presents himself as knowledgeable both about the *event* of

¹⁵ Consider this example: "Capable of high attainments as an intellectual and moral being," Garrison attests, Douglass needs "nothing but a comparatively small amount of cultivation to make him an ornament to society and a blessing to his race" (4). Though advocating "NO COMPROMISE WITH SLAVERY! NO UNION WITH SLAVEHOLDERS!," Garrison's rhetoric in the above line implies that Douglass needs to be molded in order to fit into American society (4, emphasis in original). Further, Garrison views Douglass as an ornament—or a symbol of the escaped slave, a testament to slavery's evils—rather than a functioning human able to make a difference. In short, Garrison gives Douglass a face, but assumes he has no voice.

Turner's raid, and also the *extent* of his raid. Again, we see the influence of David Walker's "Hannibal," and for Douglass, Turner has fulfilled this role. Douglass goes on to state that "it was impossible for me not to hope much from the abolition movement, when I saw it supported by the almighty, and armed with DEATH!" (*MBMF* 122, emphasis in original). We see in this instance a significant shift from Douglass's previously held notions of moral suasion and pacifist interaction; now, like in Walker's *Appeal* and in Turner's "Confessions," God is working for the enslaved blacks, and he is armed with violence. Turner's insurrection, at least in the context of *My Bondage and My Freedom*, is one crucial step toward Douglass's acceptance of a violent means of ending slavery.

Significantly, these references to Turner do not appear in the 1845 *Narrative*. Furthermore, there are dramatic differences in how Douglass portrays this integral scene of the fight with Covey in his second autobiography. The differences—particularly those of placement and language—between his descriptions of the fight demonstrate how his view of violence has shifted. In the *Narrative*, Douglass's fight with Covey is buried within a chapter while in *My Bondage and My Freedom*, Douglass devotes an entire chapter solely to this physical altercation. By doing so, Douglass demonstrates that this event was integral in his formation—perhaps, indeed, the most integral aspect in his life as a slave. Between 1845 and 1855, then, Douglass's views have evolved, and his very act of autobiographical revision shows Douglass wrestling with a self of the past, and consciously creating himself as a self of the future. But this evolution could never have happened if Douglass had not first "embrac[ed] the principles of autonomy, property, and equal rights" by *literally* wrestling with Covey (Sundquist 89-90). His very physical

violence, then, grounds his revision of both the autobiographical text and the autobiographical self. Eric Sundquist observes that, by “adopting a national ideology of revolution as a personal strategy of self-creation, Douglass makes authorial revision a mode of revolutionary action—revolt against the dehumanizing law of chattel slavery” (91). Douglass’s revision, then, translates his physical revolt into written revolt, further blending the two categories of oppression—violence and language—previously used against him.

The differences in language Douglass uses to describe this scene in his two autobiographies further sheds light on his revisionary view of violence. As Eric Goldman suggests, “although *Narrative* ... has been justly praised for its rhetorical power, *My Bondage and My Freedom*, while less turbulent and rousing in tone, is more charged with the impending national crisis, is more suggestive in its evocation of a sudden, violent, national upheaval in which slaves would play an active role” (276). In Douglass’s developing view of the looming “national upheaval,” blacks were the instruments that would end slavery; thus, in the years leading up to the Civil War, Douglass would emphasize the role blacks had in changing the national landscape. This ideal is represented in 1855, but it is absent in his 1845 autobiography. The primary way in which Douglass reconfigures the role of blacks in the “impending national crisis” is by meditating more closely on *what* exactly his fight with Covey entails. The reversal of master and slave that has been established in the 1855 autobiography is absent in the 1845 document; Douglass only devotes one paragraph to the implications of his fight, and these implications are entirely personal: “this battle with Mr. Covey was the turning-point in *my* career as a slave. It rekindled the few expiring embers of freedom, and revived

within *me* a sense of *my own* manhood. It recalled the departed self-confidence, and inspired *me* again with a determination to be free” (54, emphasis mine). While Douglass’s language in this example is undeniably endowed with a strong rhetorical force, appealing to his reader’s emotions, his fight and its results are wholly individual. While this individual emphasis is present in *My Bondage and My Freedom*—“I WAS A MAN NOW” (*MBMF* 180, emphasis in original)—Douglass expands the effects of his fight with Covey to implicate other enslaved blacks, primarily with his emphasis on the third person: “A man, without force, is without the essential dignity of humanity. Human nature is so constituted, that it cannot *honor* a helpless man, although it can *pity* him; and even this it cannot do long, if the signs of power do not arise” (*MBMF* 180, italics in original). In this example, we see that Douglass has abandoned his rhetorical appeal to emotion characteristic of his *Narrative*, and instead adopts a meditative tone in which he enlarges his individual fight with Covey and expands it to include the entire race of enslaved blacks. Douglass then addresses these slaves directly: “he can only understand the effect of this combat on my spirit, who has himself incurred something, hazarded something, in repelling the unjust and cruel aggressions of a tyrant” (*MBMF* 181). In order to feel and experience this “power,” “honor,” “independence,” “liberty,” “manhood,” “self-respect,” “self-confidence,” and “resurrection,” the enslaved must repel the force of the tyrant who towers over him (*MBMF* 180-81). Douglass has done this against Covey, and he now implores the enslaved to follow in his footsteps and resist slavery.

In *My Bondage and My Freedom*, the fight with Covey prompts Douglass’s concern for larger implications, such as race relations, the state of slavery, and the

possibility of its abolition. In the *Narrative*, Douglass tells us that this event transformed him from slave to freeman; in *My Bondage and My Freedom*, he shows his reader by rhetorically demonstrating that this shift has occurred. While relatively tame compared to other slave rebellions, Douglass's altercation with Covey certainly had a lasting effect on his own role as a slave. Importantly, Douglass enlarges his description of this altercation in his second autobiography and makes it applicable to others. When Douglass physically and rhetorically reverses the roles of slave and master in his description of the altercation with Covey in *My Bondage and My Freedom*, he also frames it in a way that includes other enslaved blacks in his formulation, which is seen in his inclusion of the third person with words like "he," "man," and "slave." "When a slave cannot be flogged," Douglass attests, "he is more than half free" (*MBMF* 181). Clearly, Douglass is the "slave that cannot be flogged," and is therefore "more than half free" but, instead of saying "because I could not be flogged, I am more than half free," Douglass employs the third person pronoun, amplifying his physical altercation to make it accessible to all slaves. Douglass ends this integral chapter with a quote from Lord Byron: "Hereditary bondmen, know ye not / Who would be free, themselves must strike the blow!" (*MBMF* 182).¹⁶ Ending the chapter with this couplet demonstrates the shift from his 1845 autobiography to this 1855 one—namely, that now, Douglass articulates his physical altercation not simply as defensive, but as the direct pathway to freedom for *all* slaves. Demonstrating this with language allows other slaves to access his experience and engage in their own resistance.

¹⁶ Though there is no space to address it here, I am influenced by John Ernest and Robert Levine's reading of William Wells Brown as a "cultural editor" (Levine 4). Referring to *Clotel*, Levine claims that Brown engages in social critique by "appropriating and working transformations on numerous texts published between 1780 and 1853" (3-4). I argue that it is apt to also describe Douglass as a "cultural editor." This inclusion of Lord Byron's couplet, from "Canto the Second," further demonstrates Douglass's acquisition of literacy, and allows the reader to see his autobiography as a form of bricolage or pastiche—incorporating other documents (i.e. poetry, *The Columbian Orator*, etc.) to add a layer of authenticity to itself.

Douglass's 1855 autobiography is more than simply a story of his own resistance against his master, then: it frames the fight with Covey as a *lesson in* rather than just a *narration of action*, a lesson the text seems to imagine as useful to all slaves.

In his study on Douglass's *Narrative*, Thad Ziolkowski documents the inability for slaves to utilize the language of their masters. He claims that "the force of the slave owner and, by implication, the ensemble of power relations underlying his force, are brought to bear upon the slave's speech in such a way as to highlight the meaninglessness of speech when unsupported by a network of power relations" (153). In this instance, Ziolkowski attempts to show how violence and language are both tools of the master, off-limits to slaves. He claims, "socially empowered language is almost solely the possession of whites. In the *Narrative*, minimal use of speech or its mirror image—pacified silence—by blacks stands for minimalized power" (158). Yet, in *My Bondage and My Freedom*, as the idea that Covey was "unable to command words or blows" (*MBMF* 178) demonstrates, Douglass resists both the "force and enforced illiteracy" (Ziolkowski 151) of his white master: now, Douglass demonstrates the "force and enforced illiteracy" against Covey, thereby reversing the roles of slave and master. As Lewis Hyde argues,

having learned to read and write, having studied eloquence, Douglass proceeds, simply enough, to write and to speak, and these *acts by themselves* undercut plantation culture, for that culture had as one of its 'eternals' the notion that writing and speaking belonged inherently to whites, that their absence was inherent to blacks. (229, italics in original)

Hyde's argument is that Douglass represents a trickster figure, ultimately undermining slavery through his theft of literacy. Thus, not only does Douglass reverse the roles of

blacks and whites through physical violence, but through his *own* textual intervention into this violence, Douglass reverses these roles more implicitly: not only does he dominate Covey physically, but while Covey cannot “command words,” Douglass can. Further, he does so on a national scale, publishing his enacted version of this physical violence and linguistically representing it as something attainable to all enslaved blacks.

Considering this idea of “theft,” and reading it as a piece of the ongoing literature about slave rebellion, Douglass’s *My Bondage and My Freedom* must differentiate itself from revolts in the past in order to succeed in engendering change in society. Douglass achieves this end precisely through his use of language. In his in-depth analysis of the Covey scene in *My Bondage and My Freedom*, Goldman suggests that Douglass is frustrated with the Garrisonian moral suasion he had adhered to and now recognizes the impotency and inefficacy of words to incite change. As Goldman claims, “this disillusionment with the efficacy of words is reflected in Douglass’s portrayal of Covey ... as an inarticulate beast, who responds, like the mules Douglass struggles to control, only to force” (281). And, indeed, in this scene we see Covey transformed into a beast. Yet, while Goldman views this rhetorical technique as revelatory of Douglass’s “growing disillusionment with oratory itself as a vehicle of change” (279), it is important to note that it is primarily through his *words* that Douglass succeeds in subjugating Covey in the retelling of the event. Language, as a social phenomenon, may therefore strike a blow to Covey and, by proxy, to the entire slaveholding class. Thus, words and language have not lost their power; instead, Douglass uses them alongside violence, and the two modes of resistance have become his primary “vehicle of change,” to use Goldman’s phrasing. In effect, by melding language and violence, Douglass’s text acts as a revisionary entrance

into the resistance literature genre, while at the same time rectifying what he seems to see as the failure of Turner's insurrection in particular. Where Gray's textual intervention contains and diminishes the revolutionary potential of Turner's insurrection, Douglass's revolt succeeds because his *own* textual intervention amplifies it and makes it accessible on a national scale.

As Sundquist explains, "the struggle against slavery was fundamentally physical, as Douglass's fight with Covey and Turner's crusade to the death make obvious; but it was also linguistic, and their written acts of resistance have meant far more to readers of the day and generations to follow" (31). And, indeed, this is true. But what was so problematic for Turner is that his "readers of the day," white slaveholders, were reading not Turner's words, but rather Gray's *framing* of those words and the violence they describe. Turner's "Confessions" does indicate that he had access to both the tool of violence and the tool of language, and he can, indeed, be seen as having appropriated these tools from white slaveholding society. As he claims early in his "Confessions," "all my time, not devoted to my master's service, was spent either in prayer, or in making experiments in casting different things in moulds made of earth, in attempting to make paper, gunpowder, and many other experiments" (Gray 431). Paper and gunpowder, indeed, but also language and violence. As Sundquist argues, "between the two he had the tools of physical revolt and literate propaganda, insurrection and subversion, that working together would constitute the meaning of his revolt and allow him to 'slay my enemies with their own weapons'" (67). But, just as Turner stole these tools of white oppression against slaves, Gray steals Turner's "literate propaganda" and his "subversion." By containing Turner's "physical revolt" and "insurrection" with his own

words, literally bookending Turner's "Confessions" with his thoughts, Gray successfully steals Turner's "paper," leaving him only with his "gunpowder."

In contrast to Turner, Douglass successfully represents his violence linguistically in order to engender a change not only for himself, but also for the nation at large, demonstrating what all antebellum black resistance literature aims to demonstrate: how to succeed in furthering abolition. Had Douglass been the textual intervener into Turner's physical violence, or had Turner himself had the domain to present his "Confessions" on its own, history would perhaps tell a different story. But, in reading these two works as intertexts, the reader can see how black resistance literature is an ongoing genre, symbiotically changing based on the cultural events and dissonance of a time period, and reflecting the nation's desire for resistance at large. Ultimately, then, for enslaved blacks in the antebellum South, physical violence was not enough to change the face of relations between whites and blacks; words and language had to work in its service.

"Men of colour, who are also of sense, for you particularly is my APPEAL designed," David Walker explains (33). "Our more ignorant brethren are not able to penetrate its value. I call upon you therefore to cast your eyes upon the wretchedness of your brethren, and to do your utmost to enlighten them—*go to work and enlighten your brethren!*—Let the Lord see you doing what you can to rescue them and yourselves from degradation" (Walker 33; italics and emphasis in original). For Walker, it is not only the educated black who will change the face of the nation, but more particularly, Walker's "Hannibal" must use "sense" and "work" to "rescue" the enslaved from "degradation." It is not enough, then, to be in possession of language, as both Turner and Douglass are. Instead, what is necessary is that that language is used to a particular end, namely, the

furthering of abolition within the United States. Yet, as Douglass became fully aware, language was not enough; violence, particularly physical violence, was a necessary move in ridding the nation of slavery. Though Douglass was still legally Covey's slave for six more months, his victory in his battle against Covey awakened within him a conviction to resist, trample, and overcome the system of slavery. But it was his textual intervention into this violence that would allow him to echo Walker's pleas and to refine and continue the genre of black resistance literature within America. As Newman suggests, in the first half of the nineteenth century, black reformers adopted a tone of acquiescence toward their white audience; "those of ensuing years," however, "embraced the radical temper of an expanded public sphere, its new era of mass politics, and its aggressive assertions of group interest" (12). And we can certainly see this trend in Douglass's life and writings.

In his 1852 speech "What to the Slave is the Fourth of July," Douglass claims that,

it is not light that is needed, but fire; it is not the gentle shower, but thunder. We need the storm, the whirlwind, the earthquake. The feeling of the nation must be quickened; the conscience of the nation must be roused; the propriety of the nation must be startled; the hypocrisy of the nation must be exposed; and its crimes against God and man must be denounced.

(qtd. in Marable and Mullings 90)

Like the trend of black resistance writing, Douglass successfully transforms his words into the "fire" and the "thunder" needed to "rouse" the nation to action, and his autobiographical revision demonstrates how Douglass aims to "startle" and "expose" the nation—rather than the individual—into accepting abolition (Marable and Mullings 90).¹⁷

¹⁷ Douglass will express these sentiments even more potently in the Civil War time period, even after abolition was achieved. In his speech "Men of Color, to Arms!" (1863), he claims, "words are useful now

Utilizing Old Testament language like Walker before him—the above passage draws from Isaiah—Douglass becomes the voice of a nation through his use of language, both oratory and written, inciting his brothers in chains to resist their own oppression through force and put an end to the “peculiar institution” which has shackled them for years.

“Appropriation,” Zoe Trodd argues, is an “important strategy in protest literature,” from the Revolution to the feminist and gay rights movements (xxv). As she claims, “protest artists appropriate the master’s tools and dismantle the master’s house” (xxv). Nat Turner demonstrates this in his actions. Turner’s act of physical resistance disempowered whites to the extent that it made them fear, and this in itself was a form of violence that Turner used. Instead of the master instilling fear in the slave with the threat of the whip, the slave has instilled fear in the master by using his own tools against him. But while Turner’s physical resistance did dismantle the “master’s house,” it only did so for a short period of time. Because he could not control the words that accompanied his physical violence, Turner’s insurrection arguably failed to further abolition. In the end, it is Thomas Gray who “appropriate[d]” and “dismantle[d]” Turner’s insurrection through his containment. But, while “The Confessions of Nat Turner” most likely could not be considered resistance literature because Gray reestablishes white order and control in the wake of his insurrection, Turner’s act of resistance—his very physical violence—undoubtedly influenced the idea of resistance and protest in the antebellum time period. And where Turner fails, Douglass succeeds, primarily because through his revision he is

only as they stimulate to blows. The office of speech now is only to point out when, where, and how to strike the best advantage” (par. 1). Words have no function now unless they are used for violence, but in this formulation, words can “stimulate” this violence into fruition. Thus, we see Douglass’s shift in paradigm solidified in this instance: from words versus violence, to words melding with violence, now, words are violence. The two are inseparable and work together to act as a vehicle for change

a conscious creator of his own narratives and is able to manipulate the resistance literature genre to meet his own ends. And the end for Douglass is abolition.

Trodd's idea of "appropriation" (or theft) and "dismantl[ing]" (or demolishing) points to the power words have in actually engendering change in society (xxv). These are words of physicality, and for resistance writers of any time period, there must be a melding of these words and what they advocate. It is not enough to *say* "dismantle" (xxv); one must engage in the action of dismantling. Thus, words essentially *become* physical, both in their meanings, and in their publication. In short, while words of resistance compel physical action, their publication endows them with a sense of physicality and immortality, and these words can then be utilized by future generations of resistance and protest writers. Trodd goes further, perpetuating Douglass's notion that "words are now only useful as they stimulate to blows" ("Men of Color, to Arms! par. 1): "For some protest writers, pens, cameras, guitars, and paintbrushes are weapons—tools that violently dismantle the master's house" (xxvi). And, indeed, this is what Douglass succeeds in doing. By first dismantling Covey through physical force, Douglass then dismantles Covey's "house"—the institution of slavery—through his violent pen.

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