

“MANY AND STRANGE EXPERIENCES OF  
SHADOW AND SUNSHINE”: IDEOLOGICAL  
VIOLENCE, SUBJECTIVITY, AND THE  
IMPOSSIBILITY OF REDEMPTION IN FREDERICK  
DOUGLASS’ LIFELONG RESISTANCE TO WHITE  
SUPREMACY, AN AMERICAN PARADOX

REWRITTEN BY HIMSELF

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Abstract: This dissertation sets out to recover Frederick Douglass as a militant by radically redefining the terms of his militancy. Beginning with the recognition that Douglass’ militancy emerges from his violent experiences with enslavement—not his exposure to other militants, i.e. John Brown—this dissertation identifies strategies of signifying and indirection in Douglass’ rhetorical performance throughout his public career as speaker, journalist, author, editor, and activist that register not only his lifelong resistance to white supremacy but also his salient critique of Christianity, liberal individualism, plantation paternalism, and the patriarchal conventions of the remarkably oppressive society that they legitimate. Often maligned by readers for espousing the core values of the dominant ideologies of his day, Douglass does nothing of the sort; rather, his critique of these pernicious ideological pillars of nineteenth-century American life resonates throughout his life’s work. Through close readings focused primarily on Douglass’ autobiographical texts, this dissertation recognizes the centrality of violence and violent self-assertion to Douglass’ rhetorical purpose; however, because violence is the language of patriarchy and white supremacy, Douglass’ ensnares his former captors in a narrative of condemnation and redemption that is, itself, the ultimate form of retribution, an exercise of pen and voice that is well to keep in mind as we consider questions of Douglass’ militancy in the synthesis of our own strategies of resistance.

## TABLE OF CONTENTS

Chapter	Page
I. IDEOLOGICAL VIOLENCE AND OTHER LIFE CHANGING EXPERIENCES: THE <i>GOOD ANTEBELLUM</i> SOUTHERN SUBJECT AND THE FOUNDATION OF FREDERICK DOUGLASS' MILITANT AUTHORIAL PERSONA.....	1
Repressive Violence: Lynch Law and Southern Subjectivity .....	9
Self-Possession: A Good White Subject .....	15
Cruelty and a Lack of Self-Control: The Failure of Thomas Auld .....	21
The Best of the Worst: Edward Covey and the Rise of Douglass' Militancy.....	25
Perhaps: An Introduction of Sorts .....	34
II. THE PATRIARCH VS. PATRIARCHY: FREDERICK DOUGLASS' IMPLICIT CRITIQUE OF CHRISTIANITY AND LIBERAL INDIVIDUALISM .....	38
John Brown: Martyr or Master? .....	46
If Not by Birth, by Marriage: Sophia Auld Enslaved by True Womanhood .....	61
III. VIOLENCE, CHRISTIAN HYPOCRISY, AND THE PREEMINENCE OF BLACK EXPERIENCE: A COMPARATIVE ANALYSIS OF FREDERICK DOUGLASS' 1845 <i>NARRATIVE</i> AND <i>MY BONDAGE AND MY FREEDOM</i> ..	75
The Paradise of Christian Enslavers and the Tartarus of Enslaved Women.....	80
Song of My-Selves: The Indistinguishability of Christian Enslavers .....	87
Henny's Story in <i>My Bondage and My Freedom</i> .....	92
The Preeminence of Black Experience in <i>My Bondage and My Freedom</i> .....	98
Eye-Witness as My-Witness: A Conversion Story.....	103

To Reiterate: The violence of Christian Hypocrisy .....	114
Chapter	Page
IV. Frederick Douglass' Subtle Subversion of Antebellum Domestic Ideology in <i>My Bondage and My Freedom</i> .....	120
“In the Family”: Family Values in the 1845 <i>Narrative</i> .....	123
All “in the Family”: The Subversion of Paternalism.....	133
A House (Valuated) and Divided: Yes. The commodity Does, in fact, Speak ...	138
Nearly-White Privilege: Inescapable Violence and a Failed Plantation Father ..	142
Voice Vs. Violence: Aunt Esther and the Shattering of Paternalism .....	150
V. Reading Redemption as Retribution in <i>Life and Times of Frederick Douglass</i> : A Post-Face .....	156
REFERENCES.....	163

## CHAPTER I

### IDEOLOGICAL VIOLENCE AND OTHER LIFE CHANGING EXPERIENCES: THE ANTEBELLUM SOUTHERN SUBJECT AND THE FOUNDATION OF FREDERICK DOUGLASS' MILITANT AUTHORIAL PERSONA

Looking back through the prism of autobiographical memory in the third and final installment of his life-story, *Life and Times of Frederick Douglass Written by Himself* (1893),<sup>1</sup> Frederick Douglass reflects on “a night and a day” (715) spent at the home of radical anti-slavery activist John Brown in 1847. Douglass recalls that Brown, “denounced slavery in look and language fierce and bitter, thought that slaveholders had forfeited their right to live,” and “that the slaves had the right to gain their liberty in any way they could” (717). In terms of his approach to anti-slavery activism, Brown “did not believe that moral suasion would ever liberate the slave, or that political action would

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<sup>1</sup> Frederick Douglass, *Life and Times of Frederick Douglass in Autobiographies*, ed. Henry Louis Gates Jr., 1st Library of America college ed., (New York: Library of America, 1996), 1081. To clarify, according to the “Notes on the Texts” in the Library of America College Editions’ collection of Douglass’ autobiographies, *Life and Times*, first published in December of 1881 by Park Publishing Company and then again in 1882 as a second edition reflecting over 100 substantive changes likely made by Douglas himself, was published in expanded form in 1893 (actually appearing in December of 1892) by De Wolfe Fiske and Company and contains over 100 additional substantive changes, which Douglass made at his own expense. The Library of America edition, cited here, reproduces the text of the final 1893 edition.

abolish the system” (717). In essence, Douglass characterizes John Brown as a militant anti-slavery activist who believes that the abject horror of chattel slavery demanded a proportionally violent response. For Douglass, Brown’s militancy offers an alternative to the Era’s conventional approaches to anti-slavery activism, exemplified by the methods of William Lloyd Garrison, Douglass’ mentor at the time, and Gerrit Smith, the wealthy politician who facilitated Douglass’ break with Garrison during the early 1850s. Steven Mailloux observes that both of the influential activists ground their work in competing modalities of political theology. In his crusade against chattel slavery, Garrison, a pacifist, relied primarily on tactics of “moral suasion” and deliberate political non-participation. By contrast, Smith’s “Bible Politics” interpreted certain biblical passages as a divine call to political action; thus, Smith and his followers sought to abolish chattel slavery through the political machinery of the early American Republic.<sup>1</sup>

While both Garrison’s and Smith’s strategies prove effective in their own right over the course of the Antebellum period, John Brown’s militancy recognizes enslaved people’s humanity and their potential for autonomy in compelling ways. His claims, the “slaveholders had forfeited their right to live” and “the slaves had the right to gain their liberty any way they could,”<sup>2</sup> do more than merely condemn the enslavers to death at the hands of the enslaved; they acknowledge enslaved people’s right to revolt on the basis of

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<sup>1</sup> Steven Mailloux, “Political Theology in Douglass and Melville,” in *Frederick Douglass & Herman Melville Essays in Relation*, eds. Robert S. Levine and Samuel Otter, (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2008), 161. Mailloux gives a succinct discussion of the “bible politics” of Garrison and Smith in relationship to Douglass’ shifting political views during the period between his first two autobiographies.

<sup>2</sup> Douglass, *Life and Times*, 717.

the same Lockean principles that underpin Thomas Jefferson's justification for the American Revolution in *The Declaration of Independence*.<sup>3</sup> Further, Douglass explains that Brown "was not averse to the shedding of blood" and "thought the practice of carrying arms would be a good one for the colored people to adopt, as it would give them a sense of their manhood" because "No people . . . could have self-respect, or be respected, who would not fight for their freedom."<sup>4</sup> In other words, Brown believes that violence is justified in anti-slavery activism; but for black activists, it is vital for self-actualization, and forging a *respectable* post-slavery cultural identity demands it. Arising out of the eighteenth-century ethos of revolutionary violence, John Brown's militant, Afro-centric mode of anti-slavery activism embraces the popular mid-nineteenth century Republican ideal of the liberal individual, advancing the notion of black self-reliance, two qualities that would become central elements of Douglass' *portrayal* of his own agency and subjectivity, for better or worse, over the entire course of his life's work.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> Leslie Friedman Goldstein, "Violence as an Instrument for Social Change: The Views of Frederick Douglass (1817-1895)," *The Journal of Negro History* 61, no. 1 (1976): 61-72, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/3031533>. Exploring Douglass' rift with the Garrisonians, Goldstein traces the "Locke-style" influences in Douglass writing during the period to his encounter with John Brown and in doing so offers a detailed discussion of Locke's influence on both Brown and William Lloyd Garrison, who recognized the enslaved people's right to revolt but, still, condemned violence. Her work does not directly make the connection to Jefferson and the *Declaration* but the impact of Locke on Jefferson is well-known and, well, arguably self-evident.

<sup>4</sup> Douglass, *Life and Times*, 717.

<sup>5</sup> Peter C. Myers, *Frederick Douglass: Race and the Rebirth of American Liberalism* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 2008), 113-119. Myers notes that "The primacy of self-reliance [in Douglass] is viewed by some as an Emersonian element of Douglass's moral thought and by others as a restatement of the classically American theme originally sounded by the representative man of revolutionary America, Benjamin Franklin." However, Myers aligns Douglass' liberalism with Locke's "natural rights liberalism" which held that "human beings are self-owners so far as they are *self-makers*" and concludes, "For Douglass, the principles of self-making could not be reduced to an



According to Douglass, the impact of John Brown's militancy on his own anti-slavery discourse and activism is profound and immediate. In time, Douglass, who had fought for his own life on more than one occasion, would persuade multitudes of black men to join the Union Army and fight against chattel slavery in the American Civil War. After meeting John Brown in 1847, Douglass recalls, "My utterances became more and more tinged by the color of this man's strong impressions. Speaking at an anti-slavery convention in Salem, Ohio, I expressed this apprehension that slavery could only be destroyed by blood-shed, when I was suddenly and sharply interrupted by my good old friend Sojourner Truth with the question, 'Frederick, is God dead?' 'No,' I answered, 'and because God is not dead slavery can only end in blood.'"<sup>6</sup> Douglass goes on to explain, "My quaint old sister was of the Garrison school of non-resistants, and was shocked at my sanguinary doctrine, but she too became an advocate of the sword, when the war for the maintenance of the union was declared" (719). Well-schooled in chattel slavery's barbaric violence, both Douglass' and Truth's connection to anti-slavery activism is far more than textual or philosophical; it is visceral and spiritual. It follows, quite naturally, that Douglass would embrace John Brown's militancy, and his prescient awareness of the role that violence would play in ending chattel slavery is certainly not surprising.

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expression of American mythology or of middle-class, bourgeois prejudice. He placed it at the center of his moral thought because he understood it to be inseparable from the natural rights principles without which his opposition to slavery and his affirmation of free, democratic government were unintelligible."

<sup>6</sup> Douglass, *Life and Times*, 719.

As a whole, Frederick Douglass' autobiographical writing presents a complex, nuanced, and dynamic understanding of the centrality of violence to life in the early American Republic. On one hand, Douglass portrays violence as repressive, a fundamental mechanism of social control in the grand sphere of national politics as well as the mundane theatre of everyday life; on the other hand, he demonstrates that violence is revolutionary, an effective and, often, necessary agent of social change. For example, Douglass' 1845 *Narrative of The Life of Frederick Douglass, An American Slave. Written by Himself* assaults readers with haunting depictions of white people using extreme physical violence and psychological abuse to subjugate enslaved black people, the repressive forms of violence that maintain chattel slavery's white-supremacist status quo. However, at the climax of the 1845 *Narrative*, published some two years before he meets John Brown, Douglass registers the substantial revolutionary potential of violence when he fights off what likely would have been a brutal (if not final) beating from Edward Covey, a poor tenant farmer who acquires and maintains a small, enslaved labor force based on his reputation as a "negro-breaker."<sup>7</sup> Douglass describes his altercation with Covey, an act of violent self-assertion, as a moment of psychological liberation that reinvigorates his frustrated desire to escape. "This battle with Mr. Covey," he recalls, "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" (65). By conflating violent self-assertion with self-actualization (manhood), Douglass suggests that, in the warped

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<sup>7</sup> Frederick Douglass, *Narrative of The Life of Frederick Douglass, An American Slave. Written by Himself in Autobiographies*, ed. Henry Louis Gates Jr., 1st Library of America college ed., (New York: Library of America, 1996), 65.

ethos of plantation life, the authority to exercise violence against another person is the foundation of personhood. Douglass underscores this connection between violence and personhood (or subjectivity) by prefacing the episode with one of his most recognizable maxims: “You have seen how a man was made a slave; you shall see how a slave was made a man” (60). Without a doubt, the passage anticipates Douglass’ ideological kinship with John Brown, whose militant, self-reliant vision of black subjectivity re-articulates the hard lessons that Douglass has learned through his own experiences as an enslaved person. Indeed, by the time he meets John Brown in 1847, Frederick Douglass is well aware that just beneath the brittle frost of chattel slavery’s repressive violence the seeds of a violent revolution germinate among the enslaved. Moreover, Douglass understands that violence is as righteous and justified in black lives’ struggle for freedom as it was for our white, Revolutionary era forebears.<sup>8</sup>

Despite his militancy, Frederick Douglass is often maligned for maintaining an (ostensible) deference to liberal individualism throughout his career in public life. Valorized by some of the most celebrated figures of nineteenth-century American literary culture, liberal individualism—a sort of catch-all term for the legitimating norms and ideas attributed to the ascendance and hegemony of capitalism in nineteenth-century American society—has since received much due criticism for its reification of the era’s

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<sup>8</sup> Goldstein, “Violence as an Instrument for Social Change: The Views of Frederick Douglass (1817-1895),” 64. Citing Douglass’ commentary on the psychologically liberating impact of his fight with Covey, Goldstein makes a similar point about John Brown’s “influence” on Douglass, pointing out, “It should be noted that this acknowledgment of the beneficial psychological effect of physical self-assertion was published before Douglass ever met John Brown,” adding that “The language of Douglass’ *Narrative* makes clear that Brown could not have had an entirely unreceptive audience for his arguments.”

most malicious beliefs and attitudes, specifically, white supremacy and misogyny. In Douglass' case, accusations of this sort of uncle-tom-foolery are generally based on textual evidence presented with little thought for the social context of Douglass' textual performance—for example, citing Douglass' several rhetorical nods to the mythos of “self-reliance” while ignoring the profound degree to which the kind of “self-reliance” enjoyed by Ralph Waldo Emerson, a white man wealthy enough to complain about inheriting money, would have been impossible for Douglass to attain. But, mis-readings of Douglass that comment on the bold, hyper-masculinity of his authorial and public personae without regard for the sheer terror of the violence from which they emerge are even more nefarious. This chapter sets out to examine the ways in which Frederick Douglass' experiences with chattel slavery's violence shape his subjectivity and, in turn, his authorial and public personae.

Douglass' 1845 *Narrative* is the story of an author who carves subjectivity from an enslaved person's utterly miserable life experiences, escapes enslavers whose subjectivity depends entirely on the eradication of his by exceeding them in their capacity for violence and deception, and emerges from this experience to tell his own story. The first section of this chapter explains that white supremacy, the ideological foundation of chattel slavery, requires perpetual repressive violence to demonstrate the enslavers' *natural* dominance over their captives. Accordingly, the violent culture that arises in the antebellum South inverts reasonable morality because being a *good* Southerner demands some degree of complicity, if not total participation, in chattel slavery's atrocious violence. In the chapter's second section, Douglass' characterization of Austin Gore—a successful overseer who murders an enslaved man named Demby in broad daylight, yet

goes unpunished—provides an example of the perverse morality that constitutes the *good* antebellum Southern subject. The chapter's third section contrasts Douglass' characterization of Austin Gore with that of Thomas Auld to show that self-possession, rather than a heightened capacity for cruelty as one might expect, marks the difference between a successful enslaver, Gore, and the complete failure of a man who presumed to own Frederick Douglass himself, Thomas Auld. In the fourth section of the chapter, the contrasts between Douglass' characterizations of Austin Gore and Thomas Auld are complicated by an additional set of comparison and contrasts to his characterization of Edward Covey, the most self-possessed and, therefore, autonomous of these three enslavers. However, even though Douglass' experiences as an enslaved person shape his subjectivity in profound ways, he does not mimic his enslavers, deriving his subjectivity from their examples. Absolutely not. Rather, Douglass—by far the most self-possessed, self-reliant, and autonomous character in his 1845 *Narrative*—measures Austin Gore, Thomas Auld, and Edward Covey according to the standard of his own understanding of Liberal Individualism. As author of his own experience, even Douglass' antagonists (including Hugh Auld, who unsuccessfully tried to end his explosively aspiring literacy) become pale reflections of his own self-image, in a text that exists only because he has beaten them and escaped them. Accordingly, close readings of Douglass' vivid account of his violent experiences with Edward Covey reveal that in his exhaustive efforts to *break* Douglass Covey perfect Douglass' education in the thoroughly soul-crushing power of chattel slavery's repressive violence. But to Douglass education is always a weapon, His education in violence leads to an act of violent self-assertion detailed in a passage often discussed as "the Covey fight." Douglass' reflections on the Covey fight

offer a clear example of his emerging militancy in the 1845 *Narrative*, demonstrating that by the time he meets John Brown in 1847 Douglass is well on his way to embracing violence as an acceptable, if not necessary, form of anti-slavery activism. The final section of the chapter reviews some key points of Walter Benjamin's "Critique of Violence" that underpin the chapter's discussion of Douglass' formative experiences with violence as an enslaved person in order to forecast the direction that the proceeding chapters' discussions will take.

### **Repressive Violence: Lynch Law and Southern Subjectivity**

Time and again in his 1845 *Narrative*, Frederick Douglass demonstrates that chattel slavery was predicated on ideological white supremacy reified by white people's authority to use repressive violence with impunity to subdue enslaved black people. This racialized exercise of power remained central to the white-supremacist social order that emerged in the South after the Civil War, and its revenant haunts black experience in the U.S. to this day. In the antebellum South, white-supremacist ideology and a pro-slavery legal system intersect to legitimate acts of violence against the enslaved and ensure a white monopoly on repressive violence. In a key passage that illustrates the complex interplay between ideologically motivated violence and the white supremacist politico-legal machinery of the South, Douglass describes the events that unfold in the aftermath of a severe beating that he receives at the hands of several white ship-carpenters' apprentices when his enslaver at the time, Hugh Auld, hires him out to work in William Gardner's shipyard in Baltimore.<sup>9</sup> Douglass writes, "My eyeball seemed to have burst.

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<sup>9</sup> David W. Blight, *Frederick Douglass Prophet of Freedom* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2018). Blight connects this passage to Douglass break with Garrison in the early 1850s, explaining, "When, less than six years later, we find Douglass tilting under

When they saw my eye closed, and badly swollen, they left me. With this I seized the handspike and for a time pursued them . . . All this took place in sight of not less than fifty white ship-carpenters and not one interposed a friendly word; but some cried, ‘Kill the damned nigger! Kill him! kill him! He struck a white person.’”<sup>10</sup> In the shipyard’s all-white court of public opinion, Douglass has committed a capital offense by defending himself against the overwhelming force of his white attackers. Now facing mortal danger, Douglass underscores his desperation as the impulse to fight relents to the urgency of flight, “I found my only chance for life was in flight. I succeeded in getting away without an additional blow, and barley so; for to strike a white man is death by Lynch law,—and that was the law in Mr. Gardiner’s ship-yard; nor is there much of any other out of Mr. Gardiner’s ship-yard” (82). The true terror that Douglass experiences in Gardiner’s shipyard stems not from the brutal assault he suffers but from the very real prospect of being seized and murdered by a mob of more than fifty outraged white men whose unfiltered barbaric rage masquerades as indignation, justified by the violent, white-supremacist ideological practice of Lynch law.

Originating in the South during the Revolutionary War, Lynch law remained as ubiquitous and unduly severe as Douglass describes it well into the twentieth century.

Ironically, this fixture of Southern culture was never actually law. David Squires

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the weighted strictures of his fellow abolitionists’ pacifism, we need only remember these Baltimore fights and his experience in the proslavery criminal justice system to understand his ambivalence. A brawler of necessity, he would ultimately find philosophical nonviolence untenable” (77).

<sup>10</sup> Douglass, *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass*, 81-82.

describes Lynch law as “a form of extralegal martial law.”<sup>11</sup> According to Squires, “In the summer of 1780 [Charles] Lynch, a local magistrate and colonel in the Virginia militia, led an excursion to protect Virginia’s lead mines from British loyalists. Having rounded up a number of suspects, he organized a summary trial that ended with the execution of accused ringleaders and whippings for the rest” (147). Squires explains that even though “the Virginia assembly decided in 1782 that the imminence of danger justified Lynch’s actions,” the Governor at the time, Thomas Jefferson, was well aware that Lynch had “forced a distinction between due process and justice” (147) that could potentially erupt in a politico-philosophical crisis. Indeed, the vigilante justice that Douglass fears in Gardiner’s shipyard is such a crisis. Ultimately, Squires concludes, “By establishing the imminence of danger as grounds for otherwise illegal action, the Lynch case introduced the conceptual other of democratically legitimated procedural law—a state of exception that permits immediate, extralegal violence” (147). During the American Revolution, British loyalists posed an imminent danger to the colonial revolutionaries who had formed their own provisional government, raised a continental army, and were heavily engaged battling British armed forces for a monopoly on violence in the region, the sign of an independent, sovereign State.<sup>12</sup> More than half a century removed from its Revolutionary Era context by the time Frederick Douglass faces fifty enraged white men in Gardiner’s shipyard, Lynch Law in the South had become little

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<sup>11</sup> David Squires, “Outlawry: Ida B. Wells and Lynch Law,” *American Quarterly* 67, no. 1 (2015): 147, <https://doi.org/10.1353/aq.2015.0005>.

<sup>12</sup> Squires discussion of Lynch law in relation to revolution, national sovereignty, popular sovereignty, and “competing claims on authority” in the American Federalist system (pgs.143-150) is informative and useful to consider, here.



more than an ideological pretext to justify repressive violence against black people, or white people sympathetic to their plight. Lynch law's dubious justification for mob-rule and genocidal, racial violence would remain the bane of black people in the South for well over a century to come.

While Lynch law sets the precedent for much of the repressive violence that chattel slavery requires to sustain white dominance, it works in tandem with the South's proslavery legal system to ensure that no white person would have to answer in any meaningful way for a violent crime committed against a black person. Before Douglass' wounds from the assault in Gardiner's shipyard have healed, Hugh Auld (primarily upset about damage to his *property*) takes him to consult with an attorney, Esquire Watson, "to see what could be done about the matter."<sup>13</sup> According to Douglass, even though Watson believes them, "His answer was, he could do nothing in the case, unless some white man would come forward and testify. He could issue no warrant on my word. If I had been killed in the presence of a thousand colored people, their testimony combined would have been insufficient to have arrested one of the murderers" (82). The practice of excluding black eye-witnesses from Southern courts sustains the authority of white people to use repressive violence against black people by silencing black voices in the political/legal spaces of Southern society. With regard to the possibility that a white man would testify on Douglass' behalf, we return to the practice of Lynch law, which becomes conspicuously *colorblind* when it comes to securing a white monopoly on repressive violence. As Douglass goes on to explain, "it was impossible to get any white man to

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<sup>13</sup> Douglass, *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass*, 82.

volunteer his testimony in my behalf, and against the young white men. Even those who may have sympathized with me were not prepared to do this. It required a degree of courage unknown to them to do so; for just at that time, the slightest manifestation of humanity toward a colored person was denounced as abolitionism, and that name subjected its bearer to frightful liabilities. The watchword of the bloody-minded in that region, and in those days, were, ‘Damn the abolitionists!’ and ‘Damn the niggers!’” (83). Here, we see a reciprocal relationship between the pro-slavery legal system, which excludes black eye-witnesses, and Lynch law, which coerces sympathetic white people into silence as well. There is certainly no justice for the enslaved in the antebellum South, nor is there justice for his enslaver, in this rare case. While ideological white-supremacy and the politico-legal machinery of the antebellum South collude to mystify this racial disparity in the dispensation of justice, it emerges directly from the plantation system’s utterly exploitative relations of production, which demand repressive violence to force the enslaved to produce unimaginable wealth for their enslavers.

Manfred Berg describes how the profitability of chattel slavery following the implementation of the cotton gin shaped Southern culture and ideology so profoundly that even white citizens became potential targets of the enslavers’ repressive violence. Berg observes, “The defenders of the South’s ‘peculiar institution’ dropped all apologetic pretenses and began to praise slavery as a positive good. Masters depicted themselves as paternalists who fondly cared for their ‘children’ and taught them the blessings of civilization and Christianity.”<sup>14</sup> To justify turning the Lynch mob against white people,

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<sup>14</sup> Manfred Berg, *Popular Justice: A History of Lynching in America* (Chicago: Ivan R. Dee, 2011), 33, <https://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/oks-ebooks/reader.action?docID=662329&ppg=5>.

Berg explains, “At the same time [the enslavers] appealed to the racial solidarity of the nonslaveholding majority of white Southerners, warning them that the abolition of slavery posed a deadly menace to all white people. The end of slavery, the defenders of bondage argued, would set free hordes of savages intent on murder, plunder, and rape” (33). The imminent danger to life, liberty, and property that Jefferson and the Virginia assembly deemed sufficient to justify extralegal violence at Lynch law’s inception is the unmistakable lynchpin in the Southern cultural logic that Berg spells out, here; however, it has become racialized, due the profitability of chattel slavery, so that any act undertaken by a white person on behalf of a black person threatens the white-supremacist status quo. Douglass’ comments confirm that the threat of Lynch law’s mob-violence is enough to ensure that no white person in their right mind would testify in his defense. In other words, no “good” white person would dare to tell the truth on his behalf. This inversion of morality, in which the truth is subversive and must be violently suppressed at all costs, illustrates the utterly enthralling force of white-supremacist ideology: its power to shape the politico-legal structures of society, to dictate its sense of morality, and to define, in terms of both limits and possibilities, the very nature of subjectivity itself.<sup>15</sup> To

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<sup>15</sup> Louis Althusser, “Ideology and Ideological Apparatuses (Notes Toward an Investigation)” in *Lenin and Philosophy and Other Essays*, Transcribed by Andy Blunden (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1971), 26-42, <http://www.marxists.org/reference/archive/althusser/1970/ideology.htm.pdf>. While not necessarily concerned with the minutiae of his re-purposing of Marxist figurations such as “the reproduction of the relations of production;” the “base/superstructure” description of the relationship between ideas and the material reality/social formations they emerge from and, in turn, reify; or “State power” as a repressive tool of the bourgeoisie, I find Althusser’s theses “On Ideology” particularly useful in coming to terms with my own thoughts, here. In arriving at my understanding of a “good” Southern subject, I accept his claims that “Ideology is a ‘Representation’ of the Imaginary Relationship of Individuals to their Real Conditions of Existence,” that “Ideology has a material existence” in its

exist, it is necessary for white supremacy, at all times and in all places, to manufacture the “natural” dominance of the whites through the violent subjugation of black people. Douglass’ experience with the brewing Lynch-mob in the shipyard illustrates that, for the enslaved, the relationship between the violence of a crime (striking a white man in self-defense) and its punishment (death by torture) need not be reciprocal. On the contrary, any “good” white subject would understand that the punishment must be exponentially severe. Often, to the ultimate degree. Few passages in Douglass’ 1845 *Narrative* illustrate this inversion of morality and disparity between crime and punishment more poignantly than the story of poor Demby.

### **Self-Possession: A Good White Subject**

In the 1845 *Narrative*, Demby’s story begins with a change of overseers at the Great House Farm on Colonel Lloyd’s plantation. With regard to the outgoing overseer, Douglass writes, “Mr. Hopkins remained but a short time in the office of overseer. Why his career was short, I do not know, but suppose he lacked the necessary severity to suit Colonel Lloyd.”<sup>16</sup> The opposite is true of Hopkins’ successor, Austin Gore, who Douglass describes as “a man possessing, in an eminent degree, all of those traits of character indispensable to what is called a first rate overseer” (28). The inversion of morality that white supremacy demands of its “good” white subjects becomes clear as

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subjects and its practices (such as Lynch law), and that “Ideology Interpellates Individuals as Subjects.” To underscore the absoluteness of ideology’s subject-making power, I point to Althusser’s claim that “the category of the subject is only constitutive of all ideology insofar as all ideology has the function (which defines it) of ‘constituting’ concrete individuals as subjects. In the interaction of this double constitution exists the functioning of all ideology, ideology being nothing but its functioning in the material forms of existence of that functioning.”

<sup>16</sup> Douglass, *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass*, 28.

Douglass fleshes out his characterization of Austin Gore. Upon his arrival at the Great House Farm, Douglass describes Gore as “proud, ambitious and persevering” and observes that “He was artful, cruel, and obdurate. He was just the man for such a place, and it was just the place for such a man” (29). Indeed, much of Demby’s story in the 1845 *Narrative* focuses on Gore’s immense capacity for measured cruelty, underscoring the irony that a man of such barbarous character could be a paragon of anything outside of the enslavers’ white-supremacist culture.

In Douglass’ 1845 *Narrative*, Austin Gore is the overseer exemplar. “He was,” Douglass writes, “of all the overseers, the most dreaded by the slaves. His presence was painful; his eyes flashed confusion; and seldom was his sharp, shrill voice heard, without producing horror and trembling in their ranks” (29). As overseer, Gore, is the full force of chattel slavery’s repressive violence incarnate. His power over the enslaved as absolute, “there must be no answering back to him,” Douglas writes, “no explanation was allowed a slave, showing himself to be wrongfully accused” (29). With regard punishment, Douglass recalls, “Mr. Gore acted fully up to the maxim laid down by slave holders,—It is better that a dozen slaves should suffer under the lash, than that the overseer should be convicted, in the presence of slaves, of having been at fault” (29). Gore’s capacity to act with such extreme severity as Colonel Lloyd’s agent signals a remarkable duplicity in his character. As Douglass explains, “He was just proud enough to demand the most debasing homage of the slave, and quite servile enough to crouch, himself, at the feet of the master” (29); and similarly: “His savage barbarity was equaled only by the consummate coolness with which he committed the grossest and most savage deeds upon the slaves under his charge” (30). Douglass is clear that Gore’s success is a consequence of

his dual nature, which allows every reprehensible quality required to enslave people to come together in one man. Indeed, it is as if the violent, white-supremacist ideology of the South is constituted in its entirety in Austin Gore's subjectivity, a *good* overseer whose character is defined by pride, stubbornness, a tireless capacity for measured cruelty, cunning, duplicity, and a sociopathic coolness and freedom from guilt. It is at the hands of this white, devil of a man that "poor Demby" meets his gruesome fate.

Set against Douglass' protracted characterization of Austin Gore, the brevity with which he renders Demby's murder is sublimely elegant:

Mr. Gore once undertook to whip one of Colonel Lloyd's slaves, by the name of Demby. He had given Demby but few stripes, when, to get rid of the scourging, he ran and plunged himself into the creek, and stood there at the depth of his shoulders, refusing to come out. Mr. Gore told him that he would give him three calls, and that, if he did not come out at the third call, he would shoot him. The first call was given. Demby made no response, but stood his ground. The second and third calls were given with the same result. Mr. Gore then, without consultation or deliberation with anyone, not even giving Demby an additional call, raised his musket to his face, taking deadly aim at his standing victim, and in an instant poor Demby was no more. His mangled body sank out of sight, and blood and brains marked the water where he had stood. (30)

If only Demby had complied. In the aftermath of Demby's murder Douglass writes, "A thrill of horror flashed through every soul upon the plantation, excepting Mr. Gore. He alone seemed cool" (30). Then, just as now, the legitimacy of white supremacy rests upon

the authority of white men to exercise violence with impunity on black bodies. As overseer, Austin Gore's primary responsibility is to legitimize Colonel Lloyd's authority over the people he holds in bondage on a daily basis, and unfortunately for Demby, his unspeakably sad attempt to avoid routine punishment offers Gore the rare occasion to express Colonel Lloyd's authority in the most profound way. Rising to the occasion, Gore murders Demby. The mechanical rigidity with which Gore performs the shocking act as well as the "cool" with which he regards the horror of its bloody aftermath demonstrates an astonishing degree of self-possession, possibly the most important of his several characteristics, mostly deplorable, that mark him as a *great* overseer.

Unlike the men who assault Douglass in Gardiner's shipyard, Gore is called to give account for his actions:

He was asked by Colonel Lloyd and my old master [Andrew Anthony], why he resorted to this extraordinary expedient. His reply was, (as well as I can remember,) that Demby had become unmanageable. He was setting a dangerous example to the other slaves,—one which, if suffered to pass without some such demonstration on his part, would finally lead to the total subversion of all rule and order upon the plantation. He argued that if one slave refused to be corrected, and escaped with his life, the other slaves would soon copy the example; the result of which would be, the freedom of the slaves, and the enslavement of the whites. (30)

Slippery though the slope may be, Gore's defense for murdering Demby—that in failing to comply with his directive Demby poses an imminent danger to the entire white race—reprises Lynch law's justification for white violence against black people book, chapter,

and verse (a defense that, apparently, seems reasonable in the minds of millions of Americans to this day). Further, Gore's defense illustrates the depth to which Lynch law's practice of ideologically motivated, extralegal violence has become embedded in the subjectivity of a good, white Southerner of his day. Gore defends Demby's murder as an act of altruism, committed out of an unwavering sense of duty and responsibility to Colonel Lloyd and the white race et al. But the outcome of the episode is most telling: "Mr. Gore's defense was satisfactory. He was continued in his station as overseer upon the home plantation. His fame as an overseer went abroad" (31). Here, I might do well to amend my claim that the legitimacy of white supremacy rests upon the authority of white men to exercise violence with impunity to subdue black bodies. More often than not, it rests on (and perpetuates) the expectation that they will be celebrated for doing so, as Austin Gore is in this passage.

Douglass closes his chapter on Demby's murder and plantation (in)justice by citing well-known anecdotal accounts of other gruesome murders; all of which, like Demby's, go unpunished. The parallels between these several unpunished murders and Douglass' experience in Gardiner's shipyard are unmistakable. In Demby's case, Douglass points out that Austin Gore's "horrid crime was not even submitted to juridical investigation" because "It was committed in the presence of slaves, and they of course could neither institute a suit, nor testify against him," and that "Killing a slave, or any colored person, in Talbot county Maryland, is not treated as a crime, either by the courts or the community" (31). The same conditions hold true when Douglass is assaulted in Gardiner's shipyard. Taken as parts of a whole, these episodes highlight the gross injustice and terror that black people face, both on and off the plantation, in the



antebellum South. Further, these episodes illustrate that white authority is predicated on the right to use violence against black people and, in Austin Gore's case, to be celebrated rather than punished for cold-blooded murder in the topsy-turvy moral eco-system of the white-supremacist South. And, finally, each incident exposes how politico-legal structures and the ideological practice of repressive violence intersect to generate modes of subjectivity and invert reasonable notions of morality to reify ideological white supremacy and to justify and perpetuate its enslavement of millions of people.

Douglass' description of Austin Gore's particular suited-ness to his occupation, which dominates his account of Demby's murder in the 1845 *Narrative*, serves as a fantastic example of ideology's subject-making force. Being an effective overseer demands an unusual rigidity of character and consistency of action. As Douglass observes:

Overseers will sometimes indulge in a witty word, even with the slaves; not so with Mr. Gore. He spoke but to command, and commanded but to be obeyed; he dealt sparingly with his words, and bountifully with his whip, never using the former where the latter would answer as well. When he whipped, he seemed to do so from a sense of duty, and feared no consequences. He did nothing reluctantly, no matter how disagreeable; always at this post, never inconsistent. He never promised but to fulfil. He was, in a word, a man of most inflexible firmness and stone-like coolness.

(30)

In describing the machine-like precision with which Gore executes the responsibilities of his office, Douglass imbues the murderous overseer's character with a peculiar sense of

professionalism, self-possession, and dedication to the task at hand—admirable qualities, indispensable to both the lowly scrivener and the fearsome, dreadful torturer. But as is the case with a certain well-known scrivener (poor fellow!), not every individual possesses the qualities necessary to be constituted as a “good” subject, even in an ideology as base and mind-numbingly simplistic as white supremacy. In the 1845 *Narrative*, Thomas Auld, Douglass’ exceptionally cruel but woefully inept owner, provides a nuanced contrast to Austin Gore’s efficiency. Comparing the two offers some insight into the horrifying range of perverse subjects who may materialize as a result of white supremacy’s constant demand for repressive violence. If Austin Gore is monstrous, Thomas Auld is alien.

### **Cruelty and a Lack of Self-Control: The Failure of Thomas Auld**

Up until March of 1832, Douglass enjoys a life of relative comfort for an enslaved person, spending much of his childhood living in the Baltimore home of Thomas Auld’s brother, Hugh Auld. When the two brothers fall out over an enslaved woman named Henny, Thomas Auld takes custody of Douglass, removing him from the only home he has ever really known “as a means of punishing his brother” (49), Hugh. This jarring introduction to Thomas Auld’s petty, quarrelsome nature sets the tone for Douglass’ life-long depiction of him as a complete failure of a human being. Describing him in the 1845 *Narrative*, Douglass writes, “Bad as all slaveholders are, we seldom meet one destitute of every element of character commanding respect. My master was one of this rare sort. I do not know of one single noble act ever performed by him” (51). Douglass goes on to characterize Auld’s ineptness as a nearly perfect inversion of Austin Gore’s brilliance. Whereas Gore possesses a number of odious qualities that enhance his ability to coerce

enslaved people into complete docility, Douglass recalls that Auld “found himself incapable of managing slaves either by force, fear, or fraud (51). Piling on the insults, Douglass adds, “We seldom called him ‘master;’ we generally called him ‘Captain Auld,’ and were hardly disposed to title him at all” (51). Ultimately, Douglass declares Auld “a slaveholder without the ability to hold slaves” and attributes his gross unsuitability to the task of taskmaster to the fact that “Captain Auld was not born a slaveholder” (51). As Douglass goes on to explain, “He had been a poor man, master only of a Bay craft. He came into possession of all his slaves by marriage; and of all men, adopted slave holders are the worst” (51). In contrast to Austin Gore, who Douglass describes as cruel and calculating, Thomas Auld “was cruel, but cowardly” (51). Gore’s consistency in dealing with the enslaved is equally matched by Thomas Auld’s inconsistency: “He commanded with-out firmness” (51), Douglass writes. “In the enforcement of rules, he was at times rigid, at times lax” (51). A poor man made rich, a lackey thrust into the role of the enslaver, Thomas Auld was “forever the victim of inconsistency; and of consequence he was an object of contempt, and was held as such even by his slaves” (51). Indeed, in Douglass’ 1845 *Narrative*, Thomas Auld is the antithesis of Austin Gore; and the contrast between the two exemplifies the range of moral depravity that materializes in the white-supremacist subjectivities of the enslavers.

Given the inversion of reasonable morality that enslaving people demands, it is tempting to imagine that a “bad” enslaver, like Thomas Auld, simply lacks the unflinching cruelty that Douglass attributes to Austin Gore, a celebrated overseer. One might go as far as to presume that Auld’s inconsistency, which Douglass finds so utterly contemptuous, betrays perhaps a latent sliver of humanity that emerges in fleeting

moments of sympathy for the enslaved, undermining his ability to properly subjugate them. But no. Douglass is clear that Auld's unsuitability to his station in life is a symptom of his deeply flawed character. Specifically, Auld lacks Austin Gore's sense of self-possession, which manifests as a form of self-reliance even when he acts as Colonel Lloyd's agent. Accordingly, as a more wholly constituted white-supremacist subject, Austin Gore, though a man of lower station, exercises a greater degree of agency over his own life than Thomas Auld, a man who claims people as property but cannot subdue them. Still, Auld's lack of self-possession points to an even more damning character flaw: Thomas Auld is, quite simply, a mean man. He could never be the self-possessed, stone-faced killer that Austin Gore *must* be in order to maintain the station in life to which he has risen by his own volition. Austin Gore, though utterly despicable, is a relatively self-possessed, self-reliant, self-made man; on the other hand, Thomas Auld, having stumbled into his high station, remains a proverbial *slave* to his own passions. For Douglass, Auld's lack of self-possession is as unforgivable as it is unforgiving, and he makes it clear that Thomas Auld's failure in life is due primarily to the fact that he is, at heart, a mean man who enjoys torturing the enslaved. And little more.

Upon arriving at St. Michael's, Douglass describes the situation in which he finds himself with Thomas Auld and his "equally mean and cruel" wife (50). Douglass writes, "I was now, for the first time during a space of more than seven years, made to feel the painful gnawings of hunger—a something which I had not experienced before since I left Colonel Lloyd's Plantation" (50). For Douglass hunger becomes the ever present sign of Auld's meanness. Douglass explains, "I have said Master Thomas was a mean man. He was so. Not to give a slave enough to eat, is regarded as the most aggravated

development of meanness even among slaveholders” (50). Growing up in Hugh Auld’s home, Douglass had become accustomed to always having enough to eat; but the enslaved at St. Michael’s “were . . . reduced to the wretched necessity of living at the expense of our neighbors,” which they “did by begging and stealing, whichever came handy in the time of need, the one being considered as legitimate as the other” (50-51). For Douglass, who is by this time a surprisingly strong-willed adolescent, these circumstances simply will not do. Douglass admits, “My master and myself had quite a number of differences. He found me unsuitable to his purpose. My city life, he said, had had a very pernicious effect upon me. It had almost ruined me for every good purpose, and fitted me for everything which was bad” (53-54). As ill-suited as Thomas Auld is for holding people in bondage, Frederick Douglass is even more so for being held. Driven by his hunger, Douglass develops the habit “of letting his [Auld’s] horse run away, and go down to his father-in-law’s farm, which was about five miles from St. Michael’s. I would then have to go after it. My reason for this carelessness, or carefulness, was, that I could always get something to eat when I went there. . . I never left hungry, no matter how great the need of my speedy return” (54). Douglass’ assertion of his own agency is clear in his transgressive act. Feeding himself is an act of self-reliance that prefigures the self-reliant man who will liberate himself and, years later, with his own acute awareness of both the repressive and revolutionary potential of violence, embrace John Brown’s militancy. But, here, Thomas Auld’s meanness collides with the adolescent Douglass’ emerging sense of his own agency and self-reliance, setting the stage for Douglass’ life-changing encounter with Edward Covey. Deeming him unmanageable, Auld puts Douglass “out to be broken” (54), contracting him to Covey for a year and plunging him

into the most dehumanizing moments of his existence. Yet, Douglass will emerge from the violent chrysalis of a year with Covey possessing a profound understanding of the dual repressive/revolutionary nature of violence and go on to become a self-possessed author of his own life's story, becoming a model for black subjectivity impossible for white-supremacist ideology to negate.

### **The Best of the Worst: Edward Covey and The Rise of Douglass' Militancy**

In thinking about the ways that Douglass' experiences as an enslaved person give shape to his subjectivity—a self-reliant black author and activist who valorizes political action and violent self-assertion over pacifism in the struggle against white supremacy—it is useful to consider the range of white-supremacist subjectivities that he observes in Austin Gore, Thomas Auld, and Edward Covey. Using Gore and Auld as examples, we have discussed the role of white supremacy's constant demand for repressive violence—facilitated by Lynch law and the proslavery legal system—in constituting the subjectivities of white Southerners in the Antebellum Era, noting the inversion of reasonable morality in both Gore and Auld, underscoring the idea that Douglass portrays the more self-possessed Austin Gore as the better of the two depraved men. But Edward Covey, the enslaver who perfects Douglass' education in the thoroughly soul-crushing power of repressive violence, eclipses both men in terms of both his moral turpitude and self-possession; consequently, he seems to exercise a great deal more agency than either of them.

Renowned for his exceptional ability to *break* strong-willed young men, like Frederick Douglass, and render them docile enough to be enslaved by lesser men like Thomas Auld, Edward Covey inhabits a unique niche in Southern society, a sort of lower

middle-class enslaver whose status falls somewhere between Austin Gore, the celebrated overseer, and Thomas Auld, the failed aristocrat. As Douglass explains, “Mr. Covey had acquired a very high reputation for breaking young slaves, and this reputation was of immense value to him. It enabled him to get his farm tilled with much less expense to himself than he could have had it done without such a reputation” (54). Despite the fact that Douglass draw attention to Covey’s tenuous grasp on the relatively small degree of autonomy that he has attained, describing him as “a poor man” and “a farm-renter” who “rented the place upon which he lived, as also the hands with which he tilled it” (54), Covey is very much his own man. In many ways, he is much more so than either Austin Gore or Thomas Auld. As a tenant farmer, Covey’s hand to mouth existence must certainly lack the sense of security Austin Gore enjoys as the head overseer for an immensely wealthy enslaver; however, being a poor man does not require Covey to yield a single moment of self-possession “to crouch, himself, at the feet of the master” (29) as Gore must do from time to time. Still, like Gore, Covey owns little more (if anything other) than his *self*, so it is also important to consider the degree of agency that his hard-earned self-possession engenders in contrast to the failings of Thomas Auld, a land owner. As we have seen, Auld claims *ownership* of Douglass and several other people but is, as Douglass emphasizes, “incapable of managing slaves either by force, fear, or fraud” (51) because of his glaring lack of self-possession. By Douglass’s account, both Covey and Auld began life as poor men, but by the *luck* of a good marriage, Auld rises from poverty to a position that he quite simply does not have the strength of character to occupy. On the other hand, Covey remains poor but retains, if only in principle, a degree of autonomy that eludes even Austin Gore, a man of similar *talent* and self-possession

but who must, inevitably, bow to his boss when the time comes. In contrasting Austin Gore, Thomas Auld, and Edward Covey, Douglass conflates self-possession with agency and establishes Edward Covey—a tenant farmer who owns only his *self*—as the most autonomous of the three and, arguably, the best example of nineteenth-century liberal individualism available to Douglass over the course of the life experiences that he relates in his 1845 *Narrative*.

To be clear, recognizing that Frederick Douglass characterizes Edward Covey in terms of liberal individualism, is not to suggest that Covey provides a model for Douglass' subjectivity. In fact, Douglass' subjectivity emerges in spite of Covey. Owing to the inverse morality of white supremacy, Covey's autonomy is predicated entirely on his capacity to subjugate the enslaved people contracted to him. Douglass describes the first six months of his life with Covey as series of beatings and psychological abuse. He writes, "I lived with Mr. Covey one year. During the first six months, of that year, scarce a week passed without his whipping me. I was seldom free from a sore back" (56). Shortly after his arrival at Covey's farm, Douglass recalls, "Mr. Covey gave me a very severe whipping, cutting my back, causing blood to run, and raising ridges on my flesh as large as my little finger" (55). For the first time in the *Narrative*, the marks of slavery's repressive violence are inscribed on Douglass' own body. Up to this point, Douglass has shocked his readers with several gruesome accounts of other enslaved people being brutally beaten and tortured, but mentions only two other instances when he, too, fell victim to the lash. Describing his childhood on Colonel Lloyd's plantation, he writes, "I was seldom whipped by my old master, and suffered little from anything else other than hunger and cold" (33). Later, underscoring Thomas Auld's ineffectiveness as an enslaver,



he recalls, “I had lived with him nine months, during which time he had given me a number of severe whippings, all to no good purpose” (54). The difference in tone between Douglass’ treatment of these two earlier whippings, which he glosses over, and his graphic account of Covey’s brutality is unmistakable. Further, in describing his violent altercations with Covey, Douglas prefers active voicings, in which he is the direct object of Covey’s violent acts, in lieu of the passive voicings of the earlier instances. For example, recounting Covey’s savagery, Douglass writes, “he rushed at me with the fierceness of a tiger, tore of my clothes, and lashed me till he had worn out his switches, cutting me so savagely as to leave the marks visible for a long time after” (56). It is significant that Douglass reserves the most graphic and personal recollections of his experiences with chattel slavery’s repressive violence for his account of his experience with Edward Covey, whom Douglass positions as his most-worthy adversary. Covey demonstrates an expertise in the use of repressive violence that Douglass has yet to experience, and as a result, Douglass admits, “I was somewhat unmanageable when I first went there, but a few months of this discipline tamed me. Mr. Covey succeeded in breaking me” (58). In breaking Douglass, Covey perfects his education in the utterly soul-crushing force of chattel slavery’s repressive violence. But, again, for Douglass, education is a weapon. Thus armed, Douglass declares, “You have seen how a man was made a slave; you shall see how a slave was made a man” (60), and he will soon learn that violence can also be revolutionary.

Douglass recounts the events of an afternoon in August 1833 when, overworked in the extreme heat, he collapses. Douglass recalls, “I broke down; my strength failed me; I was seized with violent aching of the head, attended with extreme dizziness; I trembled

in every limb” (61). Determined that the work continue, Covey begins to kick Douglass, who tries several times to get up, but to no avail. Picking up a nearby hickory slat before Douglass can regain his feet, Douglass reports that “Mr. Covey gave me a heavy blow upon the head, making a large wound, and blood ran freely; and with this again told me to get up. I made no effort to comply” (61). This marks the beginning of a turning point for Douglass. He runs away to St. Michel’s to report Covey to Thomas Auld, hoping that Auld will intercede on his behalf, at the very least, to protect his *property*. But rather than sympathy or outrage, Auld meets Douglass’ accusations with contempt. Douglass explains, “Master Thomas ridiculed the idea that there was any danger of Mr. Covey killing me, and that he could not think of taking me from him; that, should he do so, he would lose the whole year’s wages” (61). Auld allows Douglass to stay at St. Michel’s for the night but threatens to whip him if he doesn’t return to Covey in the morning. To add insult to injury, Auld, true to form, refuses to feed Douglass, leaving him to his own devices to feed himself and to deal with Covey.

Upon his return to Covey’s farm, Douglass manages to avoid Covey’s wrath until early the next morning. Douglass recalls, “Long before Daylight, I was called to go and rub, curry, and feed, the horses,” adding, “I obeyed and was glad to obey” (64). Covey, however, is not satisfied with compliance from Douglass, who describes the scene that unfolds as Covey enters the stable determined to beat him into submission. Douglass writes:

Mr. Covey seemed now to think he had me, and could do what he pleased; but at this moment—from whence came the spirit I don’t know—I resolved to fight; and, suiting my action to the resolution, I seized Covey

by the throat; and as I did so, I rose. He held on to me, and I to him. My resistance was so entirely unexpected that Covey seemed taken all aback. He trembled like a leaf. This gave me assurance, and I held him uneasy, causing the blood to run where I touched him with the ends of my fingers.

(64)

Attributing his resolve to fight to a “spirit,” as soon as Douglass commits to violent self-assertion, he begins to rise.<sup>17</sup> For a brief moment, enslaved and enslaver hold on to each other, each striving to overcome the other. As Covey loses his sense of self-possession and begins to tremble, Douglass’ self-assurance returns; his strength waxing with Covey’s unease. Finally, the ends of Douglass’ fingers—the same fingers that inscribe

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<sup>17</sup> Christopher S. Lewis, “Conjure Women, Root Men, and Normative Visions of Freedom in Antebellum Slave Narratives,” *Arizona Quarterly* 74, no. 2 (Summer 2018). Lewis’ fantastic essay is representative of recent scholarship that is critical of North American slave narratives, like Douglass’, for their affirmation of liberal individualism, which arguably normalize and perpetuate sexism, religious bigotry, imperialism, and racism, etc. During the time that Douglass manages to avoid Covey upon his return from St. Michel, he spends the night with an enslaved man named Sandy and his free wife, who is unnamed in the *Narrative*. Before Douglass returns home, Sandy insists that he take a root from the forest and carry it on his right side, explaining that if he does no White man will ever be able to whip him again. Though ambivalent, Douglass suggests that the root might have some power when he returns home and remains unmolested by Covey until their fight early the following morning, going as far as to assert, “On this morning the virtue of the root was fully tested.” (Douglass 64-65), referring to the morning of the fight. According to Lewis, “Douglass momentarily seems to affirm, however indirectly, Jenkins and his root; during his fight with Covey he is emboldened by a spirit . . . leaving open the possibility of the root having significant power” (Lewis, 121), but, ultimately, “Douglass frames his initial hope that rootworking could be an effective means of resisting slavery as a naïve and unrealized dream that had to be rejected on his path to normative manhood. For this reason, conjure and queerness become welded in an explicit association with enslavement rather than freedom, with freedom . . . being the province of Christian men who subscribe to normative, Western, and masculine expectations of gender and sexuality” (122).

the *Narrative*—draw blood where they touch Covey—the only enslaver to draw Douglass’ blood in the *Narrative*.

But, Douglass is only beginning to realize the efficacy of violent self-assertion in his struggle against his adversaries. As the fight continues, Douglass recalls, “Mr. Covey soon called out to Hughes for help. Hughes came, and, while Covey held me, attempted to tie my right hand. While he was in the act of doing so, I watched my chance, and gave him a heavy kick close under the ribs. This kick fairly sickened Hughes, so that he left me in the hands of Mr. Covey. This kick had the effect of not only weakening Hughes, but Covey also. When he saw Hughes bending over with pain, his courage quailed.”<sup>18</sup> Here, Douglass registers the dual effect of pain, the attendant quality of violence, on his enemies. On one hand, pain is physically debilitating. Hughes, “fairly sickened” by Douglass’ blow is injured and effectively out of the fight. On the other hand, the *fear* of pain has a profound psychological effect, demonstrated by Covey’s diminished courage. Seeing Covey thus shaken, has a positive psychological effect on Douglass, who notes that when Covey “asked me if I meant to persist in my resistance. I told him I did, come what might; that he had used me like a brute for six months, and that I was determined to be used no longer” (64), an unmistakable indicator of Douglass’ revived sense of his own autonomy.<sup>19</sup> As the fight rages on, the potential for violent self-assertion to effect change

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<sup>18</sup> Douglass, *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass*, 64.

<sup>19</sup> Sherley Anne Williamson, “Some Implications of Womanist Theory,” in *Within the Circle: An Anthology of African American Literary Criticism from the Harlem Renaissance to the Present*, ed. Angela Mitchell (Durham: Duke University Press, 1994), 515-521. Williamson makes the salient point that “Douglass is ... able to dominate Covey by his own self-restraint and self-control rather than by force major” (518).

beyond Covey's farm begins to materialize most clearly when Covey commands Bill, a fellow enslaved man, "'Take hold of him, take hold of him!,'" and Bill, according to Douglass, "said his master hired him out to work, and not to whip me; so he left Covey and myself to fight our own battle out" (64). Whether out of fear of Douglass or a desire to aid him in his fight against Covey, Bill's actions indicate that his fear of Covey does not warrant stepping in on his behalf. Because of Douglass' act of violent self-assertion, Covey, the renown "negro breaker," is no longer even *master* of his own barn.

After two hours of fighting, Douglass writes, "Covey at length let me go, puffing and blowing at a great rate, saying that if I had not resisted, he would not have whipped me had as much. The truth was, that he had not whipped me at all. I considered him as getting entirely the worst end of the bargain; for he had drawn no blood from me, but I had from him" (64-65). However, for Covey, a model of antebellum, white-supremacist subjectivity, the possibility that he had not thoroughly whipped Douglass is likely unfathomable. Douglass, who benefits a great deal from Covey's failure to accept his defeat, reconciles it in terms of its negative impact on Covey's reputation, which Covey could certainly not afford. Douglass observes: "It was for a long time a matter of surprise to me why Mr. Covey did not immediately have me taken by the constable to the whipping-post, and there regularly whipped for the crime of raising my hand against a white man in defence of myself . . . had he sent me—a boy of sixteen years old—to the public whipping post, his reputation would have been lost" (65-66). Douglass certainly underscores the importance of the episode with regard to the way that it shapes his own self-knowledge, suggesting that violent self-assertion is the only practical form of resistance to white supremacy's violence. If not the only form, it is certainly the most

satisfying one in Douglass' estimation, at least when he reflects on his fight with Covey in the 1845 *Narrative*. Douglass contends: "The gratification afforded by the triumph was a full compensation for whatever else might follow, even death itself. He can only understand the deep satisfaction which I experienced, who has himself repelled by force the bloody arm of slavery" (65), a clear call to anti-slavery militancy that Douglass would sound with increasing urgency, clarity, and conviction in the years approaching the inevitable American War Over Chattel Slavery.<sup>20</sup> It is no wonder that by the time Frederick Douglass meets John Brown in 1847, he seizes the opportunity to tell a terrible truth he had known all along, "because God is not dead slavery can only end in blood."<sup>21</sup>

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<sup>20</sup> In his "Introduction" to *Frederick Douglass New Literary and Historical Essays*, Eric J. Sundquist contends that in what he describes as "the most remarkable event of Douglass's life story, the fight with the slavebreaker Covey, the tone of the expanded exclamation of freedom underlines its appeal to international democratic ideals and highlights its alternative to the then widely popular capitulation of Uncle Tom to the murderous whip of Simon Legree" (14). Sundquist is, of course, referencing the 1855 version of the event; nonetheless, other essays from the same volume that offer compelling takes on the Covey fight include: Wilson J. Moses's "Writing Freely? Frederick Douglass and the Constraints of Racialized Writing"; Donald B. Gibson's "Faith, Doubt, and Apostasy"; Rafia Zafar's "Franklinian Douglass: The Afro-American as Representative Man"; David Van Leer's "Reading Slavery: The Anxiety of Ethnicity in Douglass's Narrative"; Jenny Franchot's "The Punishment of Esther: Douglass and the Construction of the Feminine"; Richard Yarborough's "Race, Violence, and Manhood: The Masculine Ideal in Frederick Douglass's 'The Heroic Slave'"; Shirley Fisher Fishkin and Carla L. Peterson's "'We hold these Truths to be Self-evident': The Rhetoric of Frederick Douglass's Journalism"; and Waldo E. Martin Jr.'s "Images of Frederick Douglass in the Afro-American Mind: The Recent Black Freedom Struggle." The presence of so much commentary on the Covey fight in a single collection of essays on Douglass is indicative of the attention that readers have given to the episode throughout the years.

<sup>21</sup> Douglass, *Life and Times*, 719.

## Perhaps: An Introduction of Sorts

Perhaps, it would be useful, here, to review some key points from Walter Benjamin's exceptionally lucid "Critique of Violence," the essay that lays the foundation for the past chapter's discussion of Frederick Douglass' formative experiences with ideological violence and the dominant models of subjectivity in the antebellum South. For one, Benjamin's "distinction between legitimate and illegitimate violence"<sup>22</sup> underpins the realization that both legal and extra-legal violence are "legitimate" in the antebellum South, so long as that violence is deployed by *good* white subjects toward the subjugation and/or enslavement of black people; moreover, it is incumbent upon *good* white Southerners to participate in the violent practice of that subjugation. Benjamin also teaches that "violence as a means is either law-making or law preserving."<sup>23</sup> Herein lies the complex of differences between the "revolutionary" violence that anti-slavery militants like John Brown and Frederick Douglass engage in and/or advocate, and the "repressive" violence that is endemic to chattel slavery, the type of violence that Douglass brings to light in the anecdotes, eye-witness accounts, and personal experiences that comprise his journey from bondage to freedom, self-liberated fugitive to free-man, and private-citizen to public-official.

A single "law-making" act of violence is rare; rather, "revolutionary" violence manifests in every moment of resistance (not all, necessarily, violent) that gives rise to radical change, the dissolution of chattel slavery in this case. However, when Douglass

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<sup>22</sup> Walter Benjamin, "Critique of Violence," in *Reflections: Essays Aphorisms, Autobiographical Writings*, Ed. Peter Demetz, Trans. Edmund Jephcott (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1978), 279.

<sup>23</sup> Benjamin, 287.

resists Edward Covey, overpowering him in a violent act of self-assertion, Covey's tenuous position near the bottom of the Eastern Shore social milieu is compromised. Though poor, Covey is not merely a good Southern subject; he is a *superior* Southerner subject, renowned for his ability to render young men like Douglass docile. To not have broken Douglass is bad enough, but being broken *by* Douglass is devastating; thus, for Covey, an appeal to the "law-preserving" violence of the pro-slavery legal system publicizing his failure is out of the question. Thus, Douglass' act of violent self-assertion is "extra-legal," offering the rare example of a single act of violence that is "revolutionary" because it is, in fact, "law-making." Douglass encodes the "new law" that emerges from his "revolutionary" violence in his 1845 *Narrative* in the recollection that for the "whole six months afterwards, that I spent with Mr. Covey, he never laid the weight of his finger upon me again."<sup>24</sup> Moreover, as history reminds us, the debacle of "revolutionary" violence at Harper's Ferry leads to John Brown's swift trial and speedy execution just a few weeks later. Brown faces the proslavery legal system's most devastating form of "law-preserving" violence because the "revolutionary" violence at Harper's Ferry lacks sufficient force to, itself, become "law-making;" however, after Harper's Ferry, Douglass fashions a posthumous image of John Brown as an anti-slavery martyr that he deploys to great rhetorical effect as a call to militancy in the years leading up to the Civil War, a substantial contribution to the "revolutionary" violence that would, finally, facilitate the dissolution of chattel slavery.

So far, we have come to understand that Frederick Douglass' militancy emerges from the amalgamation of his experiences in chattel slavery, his rare genius for self-

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<sup>24</sup> Douglass, *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass*, 65.



expression, and a lifelong impulse to resist its violent white-supremacist program of reducing black persons to black bodies—robbed of all self-knowledge, half-starved, stripped naked, broken open, empty and docile. The coming chapters explore Douglass’ resistance to the Antebellum Era’s dominant ideological forces—white supremacy, liberal individualism, Christianity, and the paternalist myth of the plantation *family*—and the “repressive” violence that they legitimate, forms of “law-preserving” violence that secure the possibility of limitless social mobility for the white men at the center of society by beating those on its margins into submission. In the next chapter, we return to Douglass’ 1847 visit to John Brown’s home to explore Douglass’ expert use of “signifying,” a rhetorical strategy emerging from black vernacular speech that allows him to imbue his texts with implied meanings and deliver salient critiques of liberal individualism, Christianity, and the white-supremacist patriarchal social norms that they legitimate without alienating white, Northern male readers enthralled to their significant ideological force. Chapter III begins by examining Douglass’ explicit condemnation of antebellum Christian hypocrisy in the 1845 *Narrative*, focusing on the devastating impact of Christianity’s violent alignment of white supremacy with patriarchy on enslaved women. The second half of the chapter offers a comparative analysis of Christian hypocrisy in *My Bondage and My Freedom*, recognizing Douglass’ second autobiography as a profound expression of his expanded agency, autonomy, and intellect that draws on his remarkable capacity to shape personal experience into tight moral and ethical arguments to foreground the authority of black experience in ways unavailable to him in the earlier text, which gives rise to the heightened urgency and precision with which he articulates enslaved women’s humanity. Chapter IV examines Douglass’

effective subversion of the Antebellum Era's dominant and deeply flawed domestic ideology, plantation paternalism, in *My Bondage and My Freedom*. In the final chapter, we conclude (for now) our discussion of Frederick Douglass' lifelong resistance to white supremacy by recognizing that the same violent social, cultural, and material realities of chattel slavery, which proscribe his expressed desire to recover his grandmother and siblings in the "Letter to His Old Master" appended to *My Bondage and My Freedom*, emerge in the extra-legal but institutional violence of the Reconstruction Era to frustrate his desire to reconcile with the white members of his plantation family in his later years. Once again, we invoke Walter Benjamin's "Critique of Violence" to consider the interpretive possibilities of his figuration of "Divine violence" with regard to Douglass' account of his triumphant return to the Eastern Shore and "deathbed" visit with Thomas Auld. In the end, we discover that Douglass ensnares his former captor in a narrative of redemption, which is, indeed, the ultimate form of retribution.

## CHAPTER II

### THE PATRIARCH VS. PATRIARCHY: FREDERICK DOUGLASS' IMPLICIT CRITIQUE OF CHRISTIANITY AND LIBERAL INDIVIDUALISM

This chapter begins with a close reading of Frederick Douglass' *Life and Times* account of his 1847 visit to John Brown's home to demonstrate how signifying, as a rhetorical strategy, generates two discernable levels of meaning—surface content and implicit content—allowing Douglass to use the exuberant celebration of John Brown's remarkable contribution to anti-slavery activism that dominates the passage's surface content to obscure his salient criticism of patriarchal Christianity in its implicit content. As the parallels between the patriarchal tenets of nineteenth-century Christianity and chattel slavery's degradation of non-normative (female in this case) bodies become unmistakable, the chapter turns to Douglass' 1845 depiction of the perhaps surprisingly similar household of Hugh and Sophia Auld, reflecting on Douglass' characterization of Sophia Auld to trace several ways in which patriarchy and Christianity align in the nineteenth century to figure women on both sides of the color line as property, making all women in some way the focal point of chattel slavery's repressive violence. Once again, signifying and other rhetorical strategies of indirection allow Douglass to avoid conveying the similarities between the lives of Northern and Southern Women overtly, a comparison that could alienate his predominantly white, male, Northern audience. Over

the course of his public career, Douglass' opposition to patriarchy remains absolute. Despite his substantial debt to Protestant Christianity's apocalyptic tropes and liberal individualism's rhetoric of revolution and self-reliance, Douglass stands as a formidable critic of the patriarchal zeitgeist that informs these ideological pillars of progressive politics in the Nineteenth Century and, ultimately, finds expression in violence against women on both sides of the color line.

To begin unravelling the nexus of relationships between violence and Christianity in Frederick Douglass' *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, an American Slave. Written by Himself*. (1845), it useful to revisit the passage in *Life and Times of Frederick Douglass, Written by Himself*. (1893) in which Douglass registers his first impressions of John Brown upon visiting Brown's Springfield, Massachusetts home in 1847. In his account of the visit, Douglass recalls his sense of anticipation at meeting the notoriously radical anti-slavery activist but underscores his sense of disappointment at the contrast between the prosperous appearance of Brown's store, "a substantial brick building on a prominent, busy street," and the "plainness ... which almost suggested destitution" of his home.<sup>1</sup> Setting aside his disillusionment, Douglass offers a robust sketch of John Brown, describing in great detail everything from his dining habits and family dynamics to the minutia of his physical appearance and "his bearing," which Douglass notes, "was singularly impressive" (716). As the two begin to converse, Douglass explains that "Captain Brown cautiously approached the subject which he wished to bring to my

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<sup>1</sup> Frederick Douglass, *Life and Times of Frederick Douglass in Autobiographies*, ed. Henry Louis Gates Jr., 1st Library of America college ed., (New York: Library of America, 1996), 715-716.

attention, for he seemed to apprehend opposition to his views” (717). After laying out the religious/philosophical reasoning behind his anti-slavery militancy, Brown discloses his plan to create “an armed force which would act in the very heart of the South” (717). As their time together draws to a close, Brown (a bit intuitively for the story, but conveniently for Douglass’ discourse) excuses the remarkable plainness of his home by explaining “that he had adopted this method [of living] in order to save money to carry out his purposes” (719), and Douglass concludes, “Had some men made such display of rigid virtue, I should have rejected it, as affected, false, and hypocritical, but in John Brown, I felt it to be as real as iron or granite” (719). So goes Douglass’ account of his 1847 sojourn in John Brown’s home, a night that will have a lasting impact on Douglass and, after a much closer reading, will add nuance to our own sense of how antebellum Christianity’s patriarchal social norms become intricately entangled with chattel slavery’s repressive violence in the 1845 *Narrative*.

Douglass’ account of his visit to John Brown’s home demonstrates his absolute mastery of signifying, a distinctly afro-centric rhetorical strategy. According to Claudia Mitchell-Kernan:

The Black concept of *signifying* incorporates essentially a folk notion that dictionary entries for words are not always sufficient for interpreting meanings or messages, or that meaning goes beyond such interpretations. Complimentary remarks may be delivered in a left-handed fashion. A particular utterance may be an insult in one context and not in another. What pretends to be informative may intend to be persuasive. Superficially self-abasing remarks are frequently self-praise. The hearer is

thus constrained to attend to all potential meaning-carrying symbolic systems in speech events—the total universe of discourse. The context embeddedness of meaning is attested to by our reliance on the given context and, most importantly, our inclination to construct additional context from our background knowledge of the world.<sup>2</sup>

While Mitchell-Kernan's work cites several examples of signifying in everyday speech, her pithy summation of the sophisticated rhetorical strategy is readily applied to reading Douglass, a spectacular orator whose written texts retain the *aura* of the spoken word to great effect. Addressing the tendency of scholars to focus on the modes of signifying exclusive to verbal communication, Mitchell-Kernan explains that signifying “can be a tactic employed in game activity—verbal dueling—which is engaged in as an end in itself, and it is signifying in this context which has been the subject of most previous analyses,” but she counters that signifying “also refers to a way of encoding messages or meanings in natural conversation which involves, in most cases, an element of indirection” and adds that this “kind of signifying might be best viewed as an alternative message form, selected for its artistic merit, and may occur embedded in a variety of discourse” (165). For Douglass, a black author writing though the peak of white supremacy's nineteenth-century crescendo, the element of indirection involved in

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<sup>2</sup> Claudia Mitchell-Kernan, “Signifying and Marking: Two Afro-American Speech Acts” in *Directions in Sociolinguistics: The Ethnography of Communication*, ed. John J. Gumperz (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1972), 165-166, <https://web.stanford.edu/~eckert/PDF/MitchellKernan.pdf>. Mitchell-Kernan's work on signifying serves as a good starting point for understanding the concept and the way that Douglass deploys it in his texts. My analysis is also informed by the second chapter of Henry Louis Gates Jr. seminal work, *The Signifying Monkey: A Theory of African-American Literary Criticism*.

signifying becomes particularly useful because it allows him to take advantage of what Mitchell-Kernan describes as the “latent advantages of indirect messages, especially those with negative import for the receiver” (169). As Mitchell-Kernan contends: “Such messages, because of their form—they contain both explicit and implicit content—structure interpretation in such a way that the parties have the option of avoiding a real confrontation,” but, on the other hand, “they provoke confrontations without at the same time exposing unequivocally the speaker’s intent” (169). Ultimately, she concludes that the “advantage in either case is for the speaker because it gives him control of the situation at the receiver’s expense” (169-170). For Douglass, signifying offers an ideal rhetorical strategy because his life-long crusade against white supremacy compels him to engage with, rather than alienate, an audience overwhelmingly enthralled to what he describes as “American prejudice against color” in the following anecdote from *My Bondage and My Freedom* (1854):

When I first went among the abolitionists of New England, and began to travel, I found this prejudice very strong and very annoying. The abolitionists themselves were not entirely free from it, and I could see that they were nobly struggling against it. In their eagerness, sometimes, to show their contempt for the feeling, they proved that they had entirely recovered from it; often illustrating the saying, in their conduct, that a man may “stand up so straight as to lean backward.” When it was said to me, “Mr. Douglass, I will walk to meeting with you; I am not afraid of a black man,” I could not help thinking—seeing nothing very frightful in my appearance—“And why should you be?” The children at the north had all

been educated to believe that if they were bad, the old *black* man—not the old *devil*—would get them; and it was evidence of some courage, for any so educated to get the better of their fears.<sup>3</sup>

Douglass is well-aware of the rhetorical constraints under which he labors. Signifying allows him to draw on his intimate knowledge of Northern Color prejudice to compose texts that convey two discernable layers of meaning—surface content that satisfies his readers’ expectations and implicit content that expresses his radical political views—and solicit substantial sympathy and support for the anti-slavery movement from the widest possible Northern audience without directly confronting the fundamentally white-supremacist quality of Northern subjectivity.<sup>4</sup>

The systemic nature of the beast with which Douglass contends compels him to craft an authorial persona—a hyper-masculine, self-reliant, self-made, Christian and liberal individual—that appeals to his audience’s ideological expectations despite the marked deviance of his body and experiences from those norms. To better illustrate the troubling impact of antebellum notions of bodily difference on American identity in the mid-nineteenth century, it is useful to consider Rosemarie Garland Thomson’s discussion

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<sup>3</sup> Frederick Douglass, *My Bondage and My Freedom in Autobiographies*, ed. Henry Louis Gates Jr., 1st Library of America college ed., (New York: Library of America, 1996), 393.

<sup>4</sup> Sarah Webster Fabio, “Tripping with Black Writing,” in *Within the Circle: An Anthology of African American Literary Criticism from the Harlem Renaissance to the Present*, ed. Angela Mitchell, (Durham: Duke University Press, 1994), 224-231. Or, as Fabio so aptly explains, “while Blacks have had to define and validate Black reality, they, concurrently, have had to protest and protect themselves from exploitation and dehumanization. They had to not only devise ways of speaking in tongues so that ‘the man’ could not always understand everything, but also had to speak out of both sides of their mouths—hurrahing Black; badmouthing White” (224).



of the role of “freak shows” in the construction of the period’s dominant model of American selfhood, the liberal individual. Thomson asserts that the “figure of the freak is ... the necessary complement to the acquisitive and capable American who claims the normate position of masculine, white, non-disabled, sexually unambiguous, and middle class,” pointing out that “such an exclusive, idealized self develops within an expanding market economy as a self-controlled individual responsible for shaping his destiny and the social order by completely manipulating his acquiescent, standard body, along with personal skills and technological tools.”<sup>5</sup> Thomson’s framing of liberal individualism’s ideal self as a social identity predicated on perceptions of bodily difference is quite compelling when thinking about Frederick Douglass’ rhetorical performance in the *Life and Times* passage characterizing John Brown. On the surface, Douglass’ conspicuously non-normative body—projecting the authorial persona of a masculine, self-reliant, self-made, Christian who is an advocate of liberal individualism—seems to praise John Brown based on Brown’s relative level of conformity to the white-supremacist, patriarchal norms of liberal individualism and its attendant religion, Christianity; however, the text’s implicit content rigorously subverts those norms.

To begin with, Douglass’ historical relation to liberal individualism is ambivalent at best. Recalling the “set of apparent paradoxes” that make his “story so attractive to biographers,” David Blight reminds us that Douglass “fought against mob violence, but believed in certain kinds of revolutionary violence” and that “he heroically tried to forge a livelihood with his voice and pen, but fundamentally was not a self-made man, an

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<sup>5</sup> Rosemarie Garland Thomson, *Extraordinary Bodies: Figuring Physical Disability in American Culture and Literature* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1997), 64.

image and symbol he touted in a famous speech, and through which modern conservatives have adopted him as a proponent of individualism.”<sup>6</sup> Similarly, Blight explains that “Douglass was a women’s rights man. But privately he struggled mightily with his sense of manliness” (211). According to Blight, Douglass “truly believed women were equal and ought to have all fundamental rights, but he conducted his personal life sometimes as a patriarch in a difficult marriage and while overseeing a large, often dysfunctional extended family” (xv). With regard to the hyper-masculinity and deference to the patriarchal ideals of liberal individualism that haunt Douglass’ authorial persona, Blight explains, “In the myth of the Self-Made Man, burgeoning all over the culture in antebellum America, and of which Douglass became a famous proponent, this archetype had to publicly prove . . . that he had mastered his ‘life, liberty, and property.’ In the psyche of every Self-Made Man roiled a nightmare of chronic insecurity in the volatile marketplace, ‘Manhood’ required mobility and independence, as it also courted catastrophe” (211). How turbulently that nightmare must have raged in Douglass, a formerly enslaved black man who, as Blight observes, “could go out and thrill an audience, but at home . . . was the patriarch who could not provide for his family” (211). It is not surprising to find that Douglass’ deference to liberal individualism, which dominates the surface content of his texts, often obscures a biting critique of the patriarchal impulses that it legitimates.<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> David W. Blight, *Frederick Douglass Prophet of Freedom* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2018), xv.

<sup>7</sup> Sherley Anne Williamson, “Some Implications of Womanist Theory,” in *Within the Circle: An Anthology of African American Literary Criticism from the Harlem Renaissance to the Present*, ed. Angela Mitchell (Durham: Duke University Press, 1994), 515-521. My argument, here, echoes somewhat Williamson’s observation: “Nineteenth-

## **John Brown: Martyr, or Master?**

The kernel of Frederick Douglass' rhetorical performance in the *Life and Times* account of his 1847 visit to John Brown's home is his uncanny ability to signify. On the surface, Douglass seems to characterize John Brown as a heroic antislavery martyr, devout Christian, and self-reliant model of liberal individualism. It is tempting to ascribe the passage's several nagging aporias to the mutability of memory, pausing only to marvel at the lyrical quality of Douglass' language throughout the passage, his rhetorical figures gathering into elegant, artfully-wrought flourishes, fashioned in eulogy to his long-since martyred friend: "Captain John Brown, whose name," Douglass reminds us, "has now passed into history, as one of the most marked characters and greatest heroes known to American fame."<sup>8</sup> However, the aporias are relentless, and, often, they draw attention to the passage's most compelling implicit content. But before combing the passage for inconsistencies and implicit meaning, let us first consider Douglass' masterful handling of the figurative language and rhetorical tropes that comprise its surface content.

Setting the scene for his visit, Douglass recalls, "ABOUT the time I began my enterprise in Rochester I chanced to spend a night and a day under the roof of a man whose character and conversation, and whose objects and aims in life, made a very deep impression upon my mind and heart" (715). As Henry Louis Gates Jr. observes,

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century black men, confronted with the impossibility of being the (white) patriarch began to subvert certain of patriarchy's ideals and values to conform to their own images" (518).

<sup>8</sup> Douglass, *Life and Times*, 717.

“Signifyin(g) is a trope in which are subsumed several other rhetorical tropes,”<sup>9</sup> and the opening sentence of the passage is flush with classical rhetorical tropes that convey its surface level meaning, to wit: John Brown is a *great man*, and Frederick Douglass holds John Brown in highest regard. To begin with, rather than identifying John Brown by name, Douglass uses series of classical rhetorical tropes, “a man whose character and conversation, and whose objects and aims in life” (periphrasis) to signal that Brown possesses a number of qualities, which we assume to be good because they “made a very deep impression” (metaphor) on Douglass’ “mind and heart” (metonymy), the thinking and feeling aspects of the self (synecdoche). It is worth noting that Douglass’ tireless trope-ing has rendered both men figuratively disembodied, which is just fine, as even the walls of John Brown’s house have fallen victim to Douglass’ figurative freewheeling, leaving the two kindred spirits “under [only] the roof” (again, synecdoche). Not even the concept of time escapes the figuring frenzy of the passage’s opening sentence, as Douglass uses figurative language to protract the few hours that he actually spends with John Brown into “a night and a day” (overstatement), a figure that reverses the word order of the peculiar but, still, conventional expression that Douglass has chosen to describe time, “a day and a night” (hysteron proteron). Two additional rhetorical tropes in the opening sentence’s introductory clause, “About the time I began my enterprise in Rochester” (euphemism, irony), offer an early glimpse of the iceberg-tip of the passage’s implicit content. So, we must bracket our discussion of the passage’s opening sentence, for now, in order to pursue our reflection on its dazzling surface.

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<sup>9</sup> Henry Louis Gates Jr., *The Signifying Monkey: A Theory of African American Literary Criticism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1988), 52.

Emerging from Douglass' keen awareness of his predominantly white, Northern, Christian readership's ideological limitations, the passage's surface content is shaped by his audience's expectations. It is important to keep in mind that Douglass *does not* make an explicit, evaluative claim about John Brown's character in the opening sentence; rather, he leaves it to his readers to *infer* that his characterization of Brown is positive, an inference likely drawn primarily from other textual portrayals of John Brown. For example, several of Douglass' own newspaper articles appearing between Brown's 1859 execution and the publication of the first edition of *Life and Times* in 1881 offer characterizations of John Brown that seem somewhat elastic—figures shaped to fit the rhetorical purpose of the occasion. In these articles, Douglass tends to describe Brown in overwhelmingly positive terms, characterizations that fall somewhere along a spectrum between larger-than-life and larger-than-that. In “The Insurrectionary Movement in Texas,” an article appearing in the September, 1860, edition of *Douglass' Monthly*, Douglass depicts John Brown as a revolutionary anti-slavery martyr with supernatural powers. He writes:

Let slaveholders beware! There is an energy in the arm and heart of the negro, which cannot sleep forever. A spirit of freedom is abroad. JOHN BROWN, though dead, has yet a voice more piercing and far reaching than the trumpet, careering over the hills and valleys of the South, summoning the long entombed sable millions to arise and assert their

liberty, and to vindicate their manhood before and against the adverse judgements and disparaging opinions of the world.<sup>10</sup>

Indicative of the period's iconic portrayals of John Brown, this passage provides the type of context from which Douglass' readers might readily infer that his characterization of Brown in *Life and Times* is categorically positive, despite the lack of explicit language in the opening sentence to denote that it is.

Douglass' impressions of John Brown in *Life and Times* combine his mastery of figurative language and classical rhetorical tropes with his acute awareness of his nineteenth-century audience's ideological limitations to create surface content that appeals to his readers' expectations. The passage's implicit content begins to take shape in the introductory clause of its opening sentence, "ABOUT the time I began my enterprise in Rochester."<sup>11</sup> Rather than representing time with language born out of modernity's obsession with productivity and compulsion to reify the illusion that time can be experienced objectively (month, day, year, and so on), Douglass clocks the scene with language that approximates a unique and unrepeatable relationship between his own subjective perception of time and his own subjective reflection on his life's experiences, inviting the reader to consider what "ABOUT the time I began my enterprise in Rochester" means in light of Douglass' experiences. While the word "enterprise" conveys a sense of self-motivation and industry that appeals to the values of liberal individualism, the principle ideologically constructed identity of expanding American

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<sup>10</sup> Frederick Douglass, "The Insurrectionary Movement in Texas," *Douglass' Monthly*, September 1860, [https://edan.si.edu/transcription/pdf\\_files/12248.pdf](https://edan.si.edu/transcription/pdf_files/12248.pdf).

<sup>11</sup> Douglass, *Life and Times*, 715.

capitalism in the Nineteenth Century, Douglass uses it with a profound degree of irony. To fully appreciate the irony packed into Douglass' euphemism for the troubled launch of his first anti-slavery newspaper, *The North Star*, it is necessary to quickly revisit the chapter that precedes his *Life and Times* characterization of John Brown, in which, Douglass recalls the series of difficulties that mark his personal and professional life in Rochester.

Of Rochester, Douglass writes, "I know of no place in the Union where I could have located at the time with less resistance, or received a larger measure of sympathy and cooperation, and I now look back on my life and labors there with unalloyed satisfaction. And having spent a quarter of a century among its people, I shall always feel more at home there than anywhere else in the country" (714). The phrase, "my enterprise in Rochester," emerges from a time in Douglass' life that is fraught with difficulty. When his house is burned to the ground in 1872, Douglass laments, "among other things of value, twelve volumes of my paper, covering the period between 1848 to 1860, were devoured by the flames" (709). In another particularly galling instance, Douglass recalls that "A seminary for young ladies and misses, under the auspices of Miss Tracy, was near my house ... and desirous of having my daughter educated like the daughters of other men, I applied to Miss Tracy for her admission to her school" (712). Even though his daughter is accepted, according to Douglass, she "came home to me one day and told me she was lonely in school; that she was in fact kept in solitary confinement" (712). Not only does this (as well as a list of other grievances) turn out to be true, his daughter is eventually expelled from the school at the request of a solitary, white parent. Significantly, Douglass notes, "Miss Tracy was a devout Christian lady after the fashion

of the time and locality, in good and regular standing with the church” (712). Douglass’ generally positive description of Rochester is at odds with several details of his experiences, there, in much the same way that his generally positive characterization of John Brown is very much at odds with several details of his experiences in his home. In both cases, Douglass underscores Christianity’s undeniable relation to the injustices that he observes.

The several instances of racial discrimination that Douglass encounters in his private life in Rochester are, arguably, less daunting than the severe impact of his “enterprise in Rochester” on his career in anti-slavery activism. The launch of *The North Star* becomes a source of perpetual conflict between Douglass and his long-time friends in the Massachusetts Anti-Slavery Society, most notoriously between himself and his early mentor William Lloyd Garrison. Having decided to undertake his “enterprise” upon returning from a successful lecture tour abroad, Douglass recalls, “in my imagination I already saw myself wielding my pen as well as my voice in the great work of renovating the public mind, and building up a public sentiment, which should send slavery to the grave” (703). But as Douglass goes on to explain, “My friends in Boston had been informed of what I was intending, and I expected to find them favorably disposed toward my cherished enterprise. In this I was mistaken” (703). Douglass admits that his old friends nearly dissuaded him from following through on his plan, but he remembers, “I did hope for success, and persisted in the undertaking, encouraged by my English friends to go forward” (703). In this sense, his “enterprise in Rochester” is a forceful assertion of Douglass’ will to project his authorial voice beyond Garrison’s sphere of influence. Although Douglass remains a nominal acolyte of Garrison’s doctrine of non-resistance



for some time, his “enterprise in Rochester” marks the beginning of a series of disagreements with Garrison that eventually culminate in Douglass’ public rejection of Garrison’s pacifist approach to anti-slavery activism in the early 1850s, creating a life-long rift between the two former allies. David Blight notes that some years later when both men attend “the Fifty-Fourth’s presentation of colors . . . Whether the two rival editors actually had much conversation is not recorded . . . [but] Garrison had now become a robust supporter of the war effort and Lincoln’s proclamation, an irony Douglass enjoyed.”<sup>12</sup> By framing his first impressions of John Brown in *Life and Times* with the phrase, “About the time I began my enterprise in Rochester,” Douglass brings every difficulty he faces there, as well as his contentious relationship with Garrison, into “the total universe of discourse”<sup>13</sup> (recalling Mitchell-Kernan’s definition of signifying) that makes up the passage’s implicit content.

As his characterization of John Brown begins to unfold, Douglass underscores his sense of anticipation at the prospect of meeting the more radical Brown at such a pivotal moment in his own career. Douglass writes, “His name had been mentioned to me by several prominent colored men, among whom were the Rev. Henry Highland Garnet and J. W. Loguen. In speaking of him their voices would drop to a whisper, and what they said of him made me very eager to see and to know him.”<sup>14</sup> On the surface, here, Douglass and his associates talk about Brown with god-like reverence: His name is

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<sup>12</sup> Blight, *Frederick Douglass Prophet of Freedom*, 399-400.

<sup>13</sup> Mitchell-Kernan, “Signifying and Marking: Two Afro-American Speech Acts,” 166.

<sup>14</sup> Douglass, *Life and Times*, 715.

powerful and too dangerous to be spoken aloud. It is worth pointing out, however, that Douglass' relationships with both Garnet and Loguen (much like his relationship with William Lloyd Garrison) are not altogether harmonious, despite the fact that all of these men dedicate their life's work to the liberation and advancement of black people. In Loguen's case, the long courtship between his daughter, Amelia, and Douglass' oldest son, Lewis, is often romanticized by historians as a great wartime love affair; but, David Blight reveals that "Lewis Douglass, recovering from his war wounds in late 1864 and early 1865, kept up his long and frustrating courtship of Amelia Longuen (they did not marry until 1869)."<sup>15</sup> According to Blight, "In September 1864, Lewis wished he had already proposed marriage to Amelia; but he could only conclude that the war had left him 'so unsettled,' without any clear 'identity.' Feeling too old to go back and live under his mother's roof he declared, 'I do not know where my home is.' Amelia apparently stopped responding. By March 1865, Lewis wrote of the many weeks of 'anxiety' over her silence" (451). In the introduction to her critical edition of Loguen's *The Rev. J.W. Loguen, as a Slave and as a Freeman: A Narrative of Real Life*, Jennifer A. Williamson points out that "Loguen tirelessly promoted the assistance of fugitive slaves, both as a manager for the Fugitive Aid Society and as a 'conductor' for the Underground Railroad in Syracuse."<sup>16</sup> According to Williamson, "For Loguen, it was not enough to merely offer aid to fugitives—he built additional rooms on his house and supplied his basement with

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<sup>15</sup> Blight, *Frederick Douglass Prophet of Freedom*, 450.

<sup>16</sup> Jennifer Williamson, "Critical Introduction," in *The Rev. J.W. Loguen, as a Slave and as a Freeman: A Narrative of Real Life. Including Previously Uncollected Letters*, ed. Jennifer Williamson, New York State and Regional Studies Series (New York: Syracuse University Press, 2016), 3, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/j.ctt1j5d93p.5>.

bunk beds to shelter fugitives” and “Publicizing these efforts to garner support led to public disagreements with Frederick Douglass and other more cautious activists” (3-4). Douglass’ disagreements with Loguen seem like trifles in comparison to the several major points of contention that arise between himself and Henry Highland Garnett.

Tracing the ideological divisions between Douglass and Garnet to the 1843 Colored Convention of National Black Leaders, David Blight observes that “As the audience in Buffalo sat entranced, Garnet threw nonresistance out the window with a flourish,” adding that “Douglass apparently squirmed and protested.”<sup>17</sup> According to Blight, the “tangle between the two former Maryland slaves over the nature and use of violence would endure forever in the history of black leadership. It would not be the last time Douglass disagreed publicly with Garnet, but within half a decade they would largely agree on the uses of violence” (133). Eventually, Douglass would find himself at odds once again with Garnet over the issue of emigration to Africa. Blight explains that “Douglass respected Garnet and the right to emigrate, but attacked the idea of willful African American removal from the United States, Douglass loathed the notion that some of the best black leaders would abandon the American ship at this pivotal hour in history” (303). By attributing his exaggerated expectations of John Brown to the reverent whispers of Garnet and Loguen, Douglass reminds us that even the most productive and significant of his professional relationships and friendships are, at times, fraught with conflict, a context that should add some nuance to our reading of his first impressions of John Brown.

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<sup>17</sup> Blight, *Frederick Douglass Prophet of Freedom*, 132.

John Brown lives up to Douglass' grand expectations, at least at first. Douglass writes, "our first place of meeting was at his store. This was a substantial brick building on a prominent, busy street. A glance at the interior, as well as at the massive walls without, gave me the impression that the owner must be a man of considerable wealth."<sup>18</sup> But Douglass soon begins to register a sense of disappointment, explaining:

After seeing the fine store I was prepared to see a fine residence in an eligible locality, but this conclusion was completely dispelled by actual observation. In fact, the house was neither commodious nor elegant, nor its situation desirable. It was a small wooden building on a back street, in a neighborhood chiefly occupied by laboring men and mechanics; respectable enough, to be sure, but not quite the place, I thought, where one would look for a flourishing successful merchant. (715)

Curiously, the way that Douglass stages this contrast between the opulent appearance of John Brown's store and the mean reality of his home mirrors the contrast between the passage's surface content and its implicit level of meaning. Later in the passage, Douglass revisits his initial sense of disappointment with the appearance of John Brown's home and "the simple manner in which he lived" to underscore Brown's absolute commitment to the liberation of the enslaved" by explaining that he "had adopted this method in order to save money to carry out his purposes" (719). Still, Douglass' disenchantment with John Brown lingers, and throughout the passage he uses language in ways that recall Mitchell-Kernan's discussion of signifying, particularly her observation

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<sup>18</sup> Douglass, *Life and Times*, 715.

that “Complimentary remarks may be delivered in a left-handed fashion. A particular utterance may be an insult in one context and not in another. What pretends to be informative may intend to be persuasive. Superficially self-abasing remarks are frequently self-praise.”<sup>19</sup> Douglass observes, for example, that “plain as was the outside of this man’s house, the inside was plainer. Its furniture would have satisfied a Spartan. It would take longer to tell what was not in this house than what was in it. There was an air of plainness about it which almost suggested destitution.”<sup>20</sup> Given Brown’s dedication to militancy, Douglass’ description of his home as “Spartan” could be taken as a compliment; however, destitution is destitution, a word which Douglass uses in *My Bondage and My Freedom* to describe the misery of not knowing his own age. “Like other slaves,” he writes, “I cannot tell how old I am. This destitution was among my earliest troubles.”<sup>21</sup> Similarly, when Douglass describes the meal of “beef-soup, cabbage, and potatoes” that “passed under the misnomer of tea” as “a meal such as a man might relish after following the plow all day or performing a forced march of a dozen miles over a rough road in frosty weather,”<sup>22</sup> his remarks could easily be read as complimentary—testifying to Brown’s Calvinistic piety or to his dedication to the self-abnegation requisite of his Spartan militarism—or derogatory—ridiculing Brown’s flippant denigration of British civility by contrasting it with his valorization of the rude

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<sup>19</sup> Mitchell-Kernan, “Signifying and Marking: Two Afro-American Speech Acts,” 166.

<sup>20</sup> Douglass, *Life and Times*, 715-716.

<sup>21</sup> Douglass, *My Bondage and My Freedom*, 140.

<sup>22</sup> Douglass, *Life and Times*, 716.

misery of forced labor and compulsory military service. Consequently, when Douglass observes that “There was no hired help visible. The mother, daughters, and sons did the serving, and did it well. They were evidently used to it, and had no thought of any impropriety or degradation in being their own servants” (716), one wonders whether he is praising the Brown family’s frugality and humility, or rather, suggesting that something nearly as sinister as chattel slavery itself is going on in John Brown’s home.

While the differences between servitude and chattel slavery in the Nineteenth Century are too significant to elide with the stroke of a pen or the clever turn of a phrase, Douglass’ word-choice is telling when he observes that Brown’s wife and children “had no thought of any impropriety or degradation in being their own servants” (716). Like destitution, degradation is a word that Douglass uses frequently in his texts (the frequency picks up significantly with *My Bondage and My Freedom*) to describe the miserable condition of the enslaved as well as that of poor white people, and he often uses it when he is comparing the two. For example, in *My Bondage and My Freedom*, Douglass’ explains that in the South the enslavers appeal to racial prejudice in order to convince poor, white people that chattel slavery works in their favor, too. Douglass writes, “The impression is cunningly made, that slavery is the only power that can prevent the laboring white man from falling to the level of the slave’s poverty and degradation.”<sup>23</sup> In another passage describing the differences and similarities between life in the North and life in the South, Douglass notes, “A free white man, holding no slaves, in the country, I had known to be the most ignorant and poverty-stricken of men, and the

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<sup>23</sup> Douglass, *My Bondage and My Freedom*, 330.

laughing stock even of slaves themselves—called generally by them, in derision, ‘*poor white trash*.’ Like the non-slaveholders at the south, in holding no slaves, I suppose the northern people like them, also, in poverty and degradation” (335). In “Letter to His Old Master to My Old Master, Thomas Auld,” letter appended to *My Bondage and My Freedom*, Douglass tells of his own experiences with degradation. He writes, “The transition from degradation to respectability was indeed great, and to get from one to the other without carrying some marks of one’s former condition, is a truly difficult matter” (416). The parallel that Douglass draws between degradation and enslavement throughout his authorial career is unmistakable; but, while enslavement it is reserved exclusively for black people, degradation thrives on both sides of the color line. Furthermore, degradation is a state that is difficult to escape because it is one into which people are forced and/or held captive by their own *ignorance* of their degraded state. Even though John Brown’s wife and children are not enslaved, Douglass’ observation that they “had no thought of any impropriety or degradation in being their own servants”<sup>24</sup> implies that they are ignorant victims of the degradation of their servitude. This implicit message becomes even more compelling in light of a wildly unstable moment in the passage when Douglass observes, “I was not long in company with the master of this house before I discovered that he was indeed the master of it, and was likely to become mine too if I stayed long enough with him” (716). Destitution is destitution, degradation is degradation, and a master is a master. In this case, the celebratory characterization of John Brown that dominates the passage’s surface content allows Douglass’ bold,

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<sup>24</sup> Douglass, *Life and Times*, 716.

straightforward, explicit comparison between John Brown and his Southern counterparts to pass as darkly humorous, ironic joke.

Douglass calls attention to the strict patriarchal order of John Brown's home by emphasizing that "The mother, daughters, and sons did the serving" (716), but John Brown, *The Father*, is served. A bit further on, Douglass establishes a profound connection between John Brown's patriarchal dominance of his family (and everyone else) and the ethos of nineteenth-century Christianity when he observes:

He fulfilled St. Paul's idea of the head of the family. His wife believed in him, and his children observed him with reverence. Whenever he spoke his words commanded earnest attention. His arguments, which I ventured at some points to oppose, seemed to convince all; his appeals touched all, and his will impressed all. Certainly I never felt myself in the presence of a stronger religious influence than while in this man's house. (716)

Given the tenor of the passage's surface content, Douglass appears to characterize John Brown as a model Christian whose level of devotion approaches sainthood; the perfect embodiment of the iron-willed, masculine, liberal individualist ideal to whose arguments even Frederick Douglass, the great rhetorical genius of the Nineteenth Century, must surely yield. However, it is important to keep in mind, as Donald Gibson argues in "Faith, Doubt, and Apostasy: Evidence of Things Unseen in Frederick Douglass's Narrative," that Douglass "had a vitriolic anger toward Christians and organized Christianity because his own experience and knowledge led him to believe that the more



religious a slaveowner, the more mean, vicious, and cruel he is likely to be.”<sup>25</sup> The textual evidence in support of Glover’s assessment is overwhelming. In the 1845 *Narrative*, for example, Douglass writes, “Were I to be again reduced to the chains of slavery, next to that enslavement, I should regard being the slave of a religious master the greatest calamity that could befall me.”<sup>26</sup> In fact, Douglass’ antagonism toward Christians and Christianity predates his autobiographical career. In an 1841 address entitled “The Church and Color Prejudice,” Douglass draws the profound correlation between chattel slavery’s violence and the Christianity that will define his treatment of it throughout his authorial career:

I used to attend a Methodist church, in which my master was a class-leader; he would talk most sanctimoniously about the dear Redeemer, who was sent “to preach deliverance to the captives, and set at liberty them that are bruised”—he could pray at morning, pray at noon, and pray at night; yet he could lash up my poor cousin by his two thumbs, and inflict stripes and blows upon his bare back, till the blood streamed to the ground! All the time quoting scripture, for his authority, and appealing to that passage of the Holy Bible which says, “He that knoweth his master’s will, and

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<sup>25</sup> Donald B. Gibson, “Faith, Doubt, and Apostasy: Evidence of Things Unseen in Frederick Douglass’s *Narrative*” in *Frederick Douglass: New Literary and Historical Essays*, ed. Eric J. Sundquist (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990), 89.

<sup>26</sup> Frederick Douglass, *Narrative of The Life of Frederick Douglass, An American Slave. Written by Himself in Autobiographies*, ed. Henry Louis Gates Jr., 1st Library of America college ed., (New York: Library of America, 1996), 68.

doeth it not, shall be beaten with many stripes!” Such was the amount of this good Methodist’s piety.<sup>27</sup>

The patriarchal principles that condemn Douglass and his cousin to a life of torture also inform John Brown’s Christian duty, as *master* of his house, to subject his wife and children to the ignorance and degradation of servitude. By using the implicit content of his celebratory characterization of John Brown in *Life and Times* to draw attention to the negative impact of Christianity’s patriarchal order on John Brown’s wife and children, Douglass makes the correlation between Christianity, patriarchy, and chattel slavery’s repressive violence unmistakable. With this in mind, the remaining pages of this chapter focus on an array of familiar passages from Douglass’ 1845 *Narrative* that illuminate myriad ways in which patriarchy and Christianity in the nineteenth-century figure women on both sides of the color line as property, making them the focal point of chattel slavery’s repressive violence.

### **If Not by Birth, by Marriage: Sophia Auld Enslaved by True Womanhood**

The vestiges of an abused child’s unrequited love are unmistakable in Frederick Douglass’ ambivalent portrayal of Sophia Auld in the 1845 *Narrative*. Of their first encounter, Douglass recalls, “I saw what I had never seen before; it was a white face beaming with the most kindly emotions; it was the face of my new mistress, Sophia Auld. I wish I could describe the rapture that flashed through my soul as I beheld it. It was a new and strange sight to me, brightening up my pathways with the light of happiness.”<sup>28</sup>

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<sup>27</sup> Frederick Douglass, “The Church and Color Prejudice” in *The Complete Works of Frederick Douglass* (Czechia: Madison & Adams Press, 2018), Kindle.

<sup>28</sup> Douglass, *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass*, 35.

To Douglass, an enslaved little boy of around seven or eight years old, Sophia Auld appears as a singularly angelic figure shining through the brutality of his early life. She is electric. Her electricity illuminates Douglass' first memories of the Auld home. "My new mistress proved to be all she appeared when I first met her at the door,—a woman of the kindest heart and finest feelings" (36), Douglass remembers. Glossing her unique benevolent qualities, he adds, "I was utterly astonished at her goodness. I could not approach her as I was accustomed to approach other white ladies. My early instruction was all out of place. The crouching servility, usually so acceptable a quality in a slave, did not answer when manifested toward her. Her favor was not gained by it; she seemed disturbed by it" (36-37). Basking in her radiance, Douglass thrives. But he is not alone. Sophia Auld's shine is peerless, bathing every enslaved person she encounters in the warmth of its rare glow. Douglass notes, "The meanest slave was put fully at ease in her presence, and none left without feeling better for having seen her. Her face was made of heavenly smiles, and her voice of tranquil music" (36). But for all its dazzling gleam, the spark that Sophia Auld brings to Douglass' story is brief. As his account of her moral decay takes a didactic turn, Sophia Auld emerges as the central, sympathetic figure in Douglass' discourse on "the blighting and dehumanizing effects of slavery" (36) on white women in the antebellum South in his 1845 *Narrative*, illustrating the subtle ways that patriarchal social norms intersect with chattel slavery's relentless demand for repressive violence to ensure the veritable enslavement of all women in the antebellum South—if not by birth, then by marriage.

Foreshadowing Sophia Auld's transformation from "my kind mistress" (38) into the "once affectionate old mistress" (82) that she will become by the penultimate chapter

of the 1845 *Narrative*, Douglass laments, “But, alas! This kind heart had but a short time to remain such. The fatal poison of irresponsible power was already in her hands, and soon commenced its infernal work. That cheerful eye, under the influence of slavery, soon became red with rage; that voice, made all of sweet accord, changed to one of harsh and horrid discord; and that angelic face gave place to that of a demon” (37). In the first two sentences of this passage, Douglass uses basic rhetorical tropes to develop a simple argument predicated on the causal relationship between two abstract ideas—chattel slavery leads to Sophia Auld’s moral decay—into a remarkably complex narrative that can be reduced to the brevity of single-sentence: Holding the “fatal poison” (metaphor) of chattel slavery’s “irresponsible power” corrupts Sophia Auld’s “kind heart” (metonymy). In developing his basic argument, Douglass portrayal of Sophia Auld raises questions about the nature of her own role in her inevitable moral decay, which now (though still inevitable) warrants careful consideration as Douglass portrays it as the product of her interactions with concrete things, abstract ideas and other people. Going a step further in the passage, Douglass asserts that the influence of chattel slavery on Sophia Auld is so profound that it causes pronounced changes in her physical appearance, specifically, in her eye, her voice, and her face—three physical features fundamental to post-enlightenment subjectivity and agency, allowing one to see the world, to speak back to it, and to be recognized as a unique and unrepeatable individual by its other unique and unrepeatable individuals. Finally, Douglass renders Sophia Auld’s physical changes in sharply-contrasted, antithetical terms—cheer/rage, sweet accord/horrid and harsh discord, and angel/demon—magnifying the existential damage that holding chattel slavery’s “irresponsible power” inflicts on her mind/body and soul.

In his treatment of Sophia Auld throughout the 1845 *Narrative*, Douglass remains emphatic that her exposure to chattel slavery leads to her downfall; however, it is important to remember that her marriage to Hugh Auld occasions her exposure to chattel slavery. In fact, Douglass points out that Sophia Auld “had never had a slave under her control previously to myself, and prior to her marriage she had been dependent upon her own industry for a living. She was by trade a weaver; and by constant application to her business, she had been in a good deal preserved from the blighting and dehumanizing effects of slavery” (36). Before she marries Hugh Auld, Sophia Auld is a financially independent woman who proves herself well-equipped to develop and maintain her own individual identity—an idea that flies in the face of the era’s patriarchal social order. Furthermore, Sophia Auld is a far more humane person before the demands of her marriage to Hugh Auld compel her to view a little boy as chattel and subject him to repressive violence to ensure his continued enslavement.

Even though Douglass draws the correlation between Sophia Auld’s inevitable degradation and her matrimonial submission to Hugh Auld far more explicitly in *My Bondage and My Freedom*, several passages in the 1845 *Narrative* make Hugh Auld’s role in her moral decay quite clear. For example, when Douglass moves into the Auld home, Sophia Auld begins teaching him to read. But soon, Douglass recalls, “Mr. Auld found out what was going on, and at once forbade Mrs. Auld to instruct me further” (36). To justify this course of action, Hugh Auld frames Sophia Auld’s benevolence as both criminal and irresponsible. First of all, according to Douglass, he tells her “that is was unlawful, as well as unsafe, to teach a slave to read” (37). Asserting the superiority of his own limited knowledge of the correct method of enslaving people over what he

characterizes as Sophia Auld's dangerous ignorance of its most basic principles, Hugh Auld reifies the patriarchal *logic* that informs his role, master of the house, in their conventional, Christian marriage. Thus burdened with the solemn matrimonial duty of governing his young wife's interaction with her human chattel (and every other aspect of her life) while educating her (at length) on the intricacies of managing his enslavement, Hugh Auld refuses to let his own relative inexperience as an enslaver interfere with his divinely ordained obligations. He mansplains the situation to his errant wife with great eloquence. According to Douglass, "he said, 'If you give a nigger an inch, he will take an ell. A nigger should know nothing but to obey his master—to do as he is told to do. Learning would spoil the best nigger in the world'" (37). Hugh Auld goes on to apply his general thesis on the psychology of enslaved people to Douglass, specifically, to show Sophia Auld the cruel impact of her benevolence. Douglass recalls, "Now, said he, 'if you teach that nigger (speaking of myself) how to read, there would be no keeping him. It would forever unfit him to be a slave. He would at once become unmanageable, and of no value to his master. As to himself, it could do him no good, but a great deal of harm. It would make him discontented and unhappy'" (37). Much of the rationale behind Hugh Auld's argument against teaching Douglass to read hinges on *practical* concerns: teaching Douglass to read will lead to the loss of our property; yet, he concludes his diatribe with an appeal to emotion: teaching Douglass to read will make him feel sad. It appears that despite Douglass' emphasis on Sophia Auld's independent nature and intelligence, Hugh Auld imagines her incapable of comprehending his *practical* reasons for mistreating a little boy. In admonishing Sophia Auld for her effort to teach Douglass to read, Hugh Auld exposes the insular nature of his patriarchal role in their conventional,

Christian marriage and reveals the profound dullness and insensitivity with which he regards his wife. Like John Brown, Hugh Auld is, indeed, the master of his house.

It is worth noting that the *only* time Frederick Douglass uses Sophia Auld's Christian name in the 1845 *Narrative* is when she enters his story as "my new mistress, Sophia Auld" (35). For the rest of the narrative, he refers to her as a variation of "mistress," except for when he recalls, "Very soon after I went to live with Mr. and Mrs. Auld, she very kindly commenced to teach me the A, B, C ... Mr. Auld found out what was going on, and at once forbade Mrs. Auld to instruct me further" (37). Calling Sophia Auld "Mrs. Auld" in this instance, highlights the role that her matrimonial relationship to Hugh Auld plays in her degradation, particularly given that later in the narrative Douglass observes, "The first step in her downward course was in her ceasing to instruct me" (40). However, in *My Bondage and My Freedom* Douglass is far more emphatic about Hugh Auld's role in Sophia Auld's downward arch. To begin with, he refers to her as "Mrs. Auld" more frequently (nine times). Describing her reaction to her husband's admonition for teaching Douglass to read, he writes, "Mrs. Auld evidently felt the force of his remarks; and, like an obedient wife, began to shape her course in the direction indicated by her husband,"<sup>29</sup> laying the blame for "the first step in her downward course"<sup>30</sup> squarely on her submission to Hugh Auld.

Throughout the 1845 *Narrative*, Douglass offers subtle hints that Sophia Auld's marriage is the central element of her degradation and presents the even more troubling

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<sup>29</sup> Douglass, *My Bondage and My Freedom*, 217.

<sup>30</sup> Douglass, *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass*, 40.

possibility that Hugh Auld uses repressive, domestic violence to maintain dominion over her. At the point in the story when Thomas Auld removes Douglass from Hugh and Sophia Auld's home because of a "misunderstanding," Douglass remembers, "Here I underwent another most painful separation. It, however, was not so severe as the one I dreaded at the division of property; for, during this interval. A great change had taken place in Master Hugh and his once kind and affectionate wife. The influence of brandy upon him, and of slavery upon her, had effected a disastrous change in the characters of both" (49). The allegation of domestic abuse is implicit in the phrase "The influence of brandy upon him." In a delightfully provocative, incendiary, and iconoclastic essay, "Herman Melville, Wife Beating, and the Written Page," Elizabeth Renker addresses "indications in the historical record that Herman Melville physically and emotionally abused Elizabeth Shaw Melville," pointing out that "white, native-born women—like Elizabeth Shaw Melville—appear to have been less likely than black and immigrant women to complain to police about wife beating, which may indicate that they were more likely to fear the stigma of dealing with police and courts."<sup>31</sup> According to Renker, "The grievances abused women did bring against their husbands were often indirect indications rather than direct charges of physical violence. Typically they charged abusive men with related offenses that were clearer and more actionable violations of prevailing norms, including intemperance, bad language, and nonsupport, rather than with physical abuses as such" (125). Significantly, she adds, "The temperance movement in particular insisted on the implicit connection between intemperance and wife abuse. In fact, 'drinking'

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<sup>31</sup> Elizabeth Renker, "Herman Melville, Wife Beating, and the Written Page," *American Literature* 66, no. 1 (1994): 125, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/2927436>.



became a code word for male violence by about 1850” (125). Relating the same episode in *My Bondage and My Freedom*, Douglass makes the allegation of domestic abuse a bit more explicit, observing that “A change had taken place, both in master Hugh and his once pious and affectionate wife. The influence of brandy and bad company on him, and the influence of slavery and social isolation upon her, had wrought disastrously upon the characters of both.”<sup>32</sup> While Sophia Auld remains a likely victim of physical domestic abuse in this later version of events, she is the certain victim of “social isolation,” a form of psychological domestic abuse that “the influence of brandy and bad company” on Hugh Auld could only compound. The image that Douglass forges—Hugh Auld drinking brandy in public spaces that excluded women in the bad company of men exactly like himself, all of them returning to the wives they kept imprisoned in their homes, eventually—makes one shudder to think how many married women in the Nineteenth Century suffered through similarly tortured lives.

The repressive violence and psychological abuse that Sophia Auld endures at the hands of her husband limits her potential to form a subjective individual identity with any significant degree of agency in much the same way that chattel slavery’s program of violent subjugation utterly forecloses on the same possibility for enslaved people. But again, Sophia Auld’s unfortunate circumstances are not unique to wives in the South or anywhere else in the U. S. for that matter. As the opening lines of Barbara Welter’s seminal essay on women’s subjectivity in nineteenth-century American literature, “The Cult of True Womanhood: 1820-1860,” boldly proclaim, “The nineteenth-century

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<sup>32</sup> Douglass, *My Bondage and My Freedom*, 243.

American man was a busy builder of bridges and railroads, at work long hours in a materialistic society. The religious values of his forebears were neglected in practice if not in intent, and he occasionally felt some guilt that he had turned this new land, this temple of the chosen people, into one vast countinghouse.”<sup>33</sup> Welter characterizes the ideal model for feminine selfhood that emerges from this existential guilt, True Womanhood, as a near-perfect inversion of Liberal Individualism. An agonizingly passive female counterpart to the Liberal Individual’s hyper-masculine vitality, the True Woman, according to Welter, allows him to “salve his conscience by reflecting that he had left behind a hostage, not only to fortune, but to all the values he held so dear and treated so lightly. Woman,” Welter contends, “in the cult of True Womanhood presented by the women’s magazines, gift annuals and religious literature of the nineteenth century, was the hostage in the home” (151). Welter explains that “The attributes of True Womanhood, by which a woman judged herself and was judged by her husband, her neighbors and society could be divided into four cardinal virtues—piety, purity, submissiveness and domesticity” (152); and, arguably, Douglass carefully measures the crushing impact of repressive violence on Sophia Auld in terms of her failure to fully embody the virtues of True Womanhood despite her sincere desire and vigorous effort to do so. For example, when Douglass writes, “My mistress, who had kindly commenced to instruct me, had, in compliance with the advice and direction of her husband, not only ceased to instruct, but had set her face against my being instructed by any one else,”<sup>34</sup> he

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<sup>33</sup> Barbara Welter, “The Cult of True Womanhood:1820-1860,” *American Quarterly* 18, no. 2 (1996): 151, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/2711179>.

<sup>34</sup> Douglass, *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass*, 39.

calls attention to Sophia Auld's zealous acquiescence to her husband's will in accordance with True Womanhood's cardinal virtues of submissiveness and domesticity. Similarly, Douglass goes on to explain "that she did not adopt this course of treatment immediately. She at first lacked the depravity indispensable to shutting me up in mental darkness. It was at least necessary for her to have some training in the exercise of irresponsible power, to make her equal to the task of treating me as though I were a brute" (39-40). Here, Douglass not only illustrates a fundamental argument of his narrative's anti-slavery discourse—that exercising the repressive violence necessary to enslave a person is enough to destroy even the most well-intentioned enslavers—but he also presents Sophia Auld's transformation as a fall.

Welter characterizes the figure of the fallen woman as a somewhat clichéd fixture of texts from the period that deploy the virtues of True Womanhood rhetorically in didactic, cautionary tales urging young women "in the strongest possible terms, to maintain their virtue."<sup>35</sup> She explains that "Purity was as essential as piety to a young woman, its absence as un-natural and unfeminine ... A 'fallen woman' was a 'fallen angel,' unworthy of the celestial company of her sex. To contemplate the loss of purity brought tears; to be guilty of such a crime, in the women's magazines at least, brought madness or death" (154). Besides "women's magazines," Welter cites a number of texts such as Lucy Hooper's *The Lady's Book of Flowers and Poetry*; Thomas Branagan's *The Excellency of the Female Character Vindicated*; Mrs. Eliza Farrar's *the Young Lady's Friend*; Mrs. A. J. Graves' *Girlhood and Womanhood: Or Sketches of My Schoolmates*,

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<sup>35</sup> Welter, "The Cult of True Womanhood:1820-1860," 155.

Fanny Forester's "Lucy Dutton," and Nathaniel Hawthorne's well-known *The Blithedale Romance*. Such texts presuppose sexual purity as an essential quality of a woman's identity that can be *lost*, and they often portray women who have *lost* their virtue as fallen, lacking, or tragically degraded. Sophia Auld's fall, however, has nothing to do with her sexual purity—Douglass never calls that into question—rather, he characterizes Sophia Auld's moral decay as a fall from grace that manifests as a loss of piety.

Of the four virtues of True Womanhood that Welter catalogues, "Religion or piety," she writes, "was the core of woman's virtue, the source of her strength. Young men looking for a mate were cautioned to search first for piety, for if that were there, all else would follow" (152). When Douglass arrives in Baltimore, he describes Sophia Auld as "a pious, warm, and tender-hearted woman," remembering that "There was no sorrow or suffering for which she had not a tear. She had bread for the hungry, clothes for the naked, and comfort for every mourner that came within her reach" until "Slavery soon proved to divest her of these heavenly qualities. Under its influence, the tender heart became stone, and the lamblike disposition gave way to one of tiger-like fierceness."<sup>36</sup> Douglass' characterization of Sophia Auld, here, is a clear allusion to the Biblical parable of "The Sheep and the Goats" in which the righteous "sheep" are rewarded with "eternal life" while the wicked "goats" are damned to "eternal punishment" (Mt. 25:46 [NIV]). According to this parable of divine judgement, Christ returns to separate the sheep from the goats, placing the sheep to his right and the goats to his left:

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<sup>36</sup> Douglass, *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass*, 40.

Then the king will say to those on his right, “come, you who are blessed by my Father; take your inheritance, the kingdom prepared for you since the creation of the world. For I was hungry and you gave me something to eat, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you invited me in, I needed clothes and you clothed me, I was sick and you looked after me, I was in prison and you came to visit me.” (Mt. 25:34-36 [NIV])

When the righteous, unsure of when they did any of these things, inquire further, according to the parable, “The King will reply, ‘Truly I tell you, whatever you did for the least of these brothers and sisters of mine, you did for me’” (Mt. 25:40 [NIV]). The pattern repeats for the “goats” but in categorically negative terms. Describing Sophia Auld’s fall in this specific way—from the righteous path of the “sheep” into the wicked ways of the goats—suggests that her exposure to chattel slavery through her marriage to Hugh Auld has not only been detrimental to her mind/body but also her supposed eternal soul. Further, if Sophia Auld’s kindness to Douglass, one of “the least of these,” establishes her place among the righteous, the passage implies that acting on behalf of the enslaved is a way to ensure one’s eternal reward, a powerful bit of rhetoric in an era dominated by political theology. Conversely, the passage implies that those who do not help the enslaved face the threat of divine retribution as much as the enslavers themselves.

Even if the influence of chattel slavery is not the sole cause (or even the principle cause) of Sophia Auld’s fall from the virtues of True womanhood, it makes sense for Douglass to figure it as such because, as Barbara Welter asserts:

In a society where values changed frequently, where fortunes rose and fell with frightening rapidity, where social and economic mobility provided instability as well as hope, one thing at least remained the same—a true woman was a true woman, wherever she was found. If anyone, male or female, dared to tamper with the complex of virtues which made up True Womanhood, he was damned immediately as an enemy of God, of civilization and of the Republic.<sup>37</sup>

Indeed, characterizing Sophia Auld's moral decay as a failure to attain the virtues of "True Womanhood" and attributing it to "the influence of slavery" lends tremendous rhetorical force to Douglass' anti-slavery discourse in the 1845 *Narrative* because it implies that chattel slavery is the enemy of all things considered good according to the period's woefully misogynist standards. But all is not lost for Sophia Auld. After his brutal beating in Gardiner's shipyard, Douglass suggests that she may yet retain the virtues of a True Woman, recalling, "My puffed-out eye and blood covered face moved her to tears. She took a chair by me, washed the blood from my face, and, with a mother's tenderness, bound up my head, covering the wounded eye with a lean piece of fresh beef. It was almost compensation for my suffering to witness, once more, a manifestation of kindness from this, my once affectionate old mistress."<sup>38</sup> Here, Sophia Auld's piety and domesticity re-emerge in a moment of mother-like tenderness, portrayed as an *instinctual* response to Douglass' disfigurement. She is, after all, the central, sympathetic figure

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<sup>37</sup> Welter, "The Cult of True Womanhood:1820-1860," 151-152.

<sup>38</sup> Douglass, *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass*, 82.

illustrating Chattel slavery's degrading effect on white women in the antebellum South. While the role of Christianity in Sophia Auld's degradation is implicit in the 1845 *Narrative*, Douglass registers its devastating impact on enslaved women quite clearly in several gut-wrenching episodes that depict the extreme violence that they suffer at the hands of their *Christian* enslavers.

## CHAPTER III

### VIOLENCE, CHRISTIAN HYPOCRISY, AND THE PREEMINENCE OF BLACK EXPERIENCE: A COMPARATIVE ANALYSIS OF FREDERICK DOUGLASS 1845 *NARRATIVE AND MY BONDAGE AND MY FREEDOM*

So far, we have come to understand Frederick Douglass' tendency to embrace increasingly violent forms of anti-slavery activism in the years leading up to the Civil War in terms of his unique experiences with chattel slavery's ideological violence, finding the earliest expressions of his militancy in his self-possessed authorial persona and valorization of violent self-assertion in the 1845 *Narrative*. We have also shown how "signifying," a distinctly afro-centric rhetorical strategy, imbues Douglass' texts with multiple layers of meaning, discovering an implicit critique of antebellum Christianity's patriarchal social norms, born out in our close readings of the *Life and Times* account of his 1847 visit to John Brown's home and his characterization of Sophia Auld in the 1845 *Narrative*. This chapter focuses on the explicit elements of Douglass' critique of Christianity in the 1845 *Narrative*, which find expression in several examples that illustrate the hypocrisy of Christian enslavers, culminating in a polemic against "the



slaveholding religion of this land”<sup>1</sup> in its Appendix that castigates “the overwhelming mass of professed Christians in America” (99) for their complicity in the religion of chattel slavery. Much like his implicit critique of Christianity, which registers the unfortunate consequences of its patriarchal social norms for women like Sophia Auld, Douglass’ explicit condemnation of Christianity in the 1845 *Narrative* remains focused on its impact on women, calling attention to its legitimation of chattel slavery’s violent alignment of white supremacy with patriarchy that results in the utter annihilation of enslaved women’s subjectivities.

For example, following Douglass’ life-changing encounter with Edward Covey, he goes to live with Mr. William Freeland. Unlike Covey, Freeland is not a religious man. Finding the conditions of his enslavement much improved, Douglass asserts, “the religion of the South is a mere covering for the most horrid crimes,” describing it as “a dark shelter under which the darkest, foulest, grossest, and most infernal deeds of slaveholders find the strongest protection” (68). Douglass goes on to declare: “Were I to be again reduced to the chains of slavery, next to that enslavement, I should regard being the slave of a religious master the greatest calamity that could befall me. For of all slaveholders with whom I have ever met, religious slaveholders are the worst” (68). As evidence, Douglass offers the atrocious conduct of Rev. Daniel Weeden, one of the local “members and ministers in the Reformed Methodist Church,” recalling that “Weeden owned, among others, a woman slave, whose name I have forgotten” (69). Douglass

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<sup>1</sup> Frederick Douglass, *Narrative of The Life of Frederick Douglass, An American Slave. Written by Himself in Autobiographies*, ed. Henry Louis Gates Jr., 1st Library of America college ed., (New York: Library of America, 1996), 97.

reports that the “woman’s back, for weeks, was kept literally raw, made so by the lash of this merciless, *religious* wretch” (69). The agonizing duration of the nameless woman’s torture, which goes on “for weeks,” is amplified by the graphic image of the rawness of her back. Arguably, the fact that Douglass has forgotten the woman’s name underscores the idea that her subjectivity has thoroughly collapsed under the violent conditions of her enslavement. In the 1845 *Narrative*, the woman is little more than a gendered sign of her Christian enslaver’s violence, and as such, she has less agency than his lash, which is the actual agent of her violent undoing. As the rationale for Weeden’s cruelty, Douglass offers his “maxim ... Behave well or behave ill, it is the duty of a master occasionally to whip a slave, to remind him of his master’s authority” (69). While the brief passage fails to connect Weeden’s “maxim” with any of the specific social norms or biblical precepts that inform his idea of his own authority, it stands out as one of the more forceful examples of a Christian enslaver’s brutality in the 1845 *Narrative*.

It is worth pausing, here, to note that when the nameless woman reappears a decade later in *My Bondage and My Freedom* (1855) she has a name, “Poor Ceal,” and that her back is “always scantily clothed” and “kept literally raw”<sup>2</sup> infinitely, rather than “for weeks.”<sup>3</sup> Further, Weeden is neither “Reformed Methodist” nor “*religious* wretch” (69); rather, in 1855 Douglass calls him a “local preacher of the Protestant Methodist persuasion,” a “most notoriously wicked man,” and a “brute.”<sup>4</sup> With regard to Ceal,

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<sup>2</sup> Frederick Douglass, *My Bondage and My Freedom in Autobiographies*, ed. Henry Louis Gates Jr., 1st Library of America college ed., (New York: Library of America, 1996), 294.

<sup>3</sup> Douglass, *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass*, 69.

<sup>4</sup> Douglass, *My Bondage and My Freedom*, 293-294.

Douglass' changes to the passage—his decision to use her name, to emphasize the perverse sexual dimension of her captivity, and to describe her pain as never-ending—recognize her personhood in the face of Weeden's abuse, enhancing the rhetorical impact of the passage. Sidonie Smith explains that autobiographical "narrators become readers of their experiential histories, bringing discursive schema that are culturally available to them to bear on what has happened ... in Douglass's case," she observes, "retelling the 'same' story divergently in two subsequent narratives, invite[s] readers to question whether different readings of an experience signal stages of, or changes in, the overall pattern of beliefs encoded in the autobiographical story."<sup>5</sup> For Douglass, a great many things change between the publication of the first two installments of his autobiographical opus: Frederick Douglass, the fugitive slave, buys himself from Thomas Auld becoming Frederick Douglass, the Freeman, who parts ways with the Garrisonian *friends* who have for so long shackled his pen, gaining a tremendous amount of editorial control over his own life's story. Though subtle, at times, the changes that Douglass makes to the passage between 1845 and 1855 are quite significant, calling attention to the rapid expansion of his agency, autonomy, and intellect during the period, which gives rise to the heightened urgency and precision with which he articulates enslaved women's humanity in the second installment of his autobiographical oeuvre.

Accordingly, the first half of this chapter takes a look at one of the most disturbing passages in the 1845 *Narrative*, Douglass' snapshot of life at St. Michael's after Thomas Auld's conversion to Christianity, which offers an eye-witness account of

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<sup>5</sup> Sidonie Smith and Julia Watson, *Reading Autobiography: A Guide for Interpreting Life Narratives* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2010), 33.

the perverse brutality and abject horror that Christian enslavers visit on enslaved women's daily lives in their zeal for what he describes in the Appendix as, "the corrupt, slaveholding, women-whipping, cradle-plundering, partial and hypocritical Christianity of this land."<sup>6</sup> Through close readings of this passage, we demonstrate how Douglass incorporates his mastery of antithesis and irony into his rhetorical performance to reveal the tautological nature of Christian hypocrisy at St. Michael's, a microcosm of antebellum Christianity's wide-spread, institutional legitimation of chattel slavery's white-supremacist ideological violence, which looms just behind Christian hypocrisy's thin veil of piety. For Douglass, Christian enslavers are barely distinguishable as individuals in their hypocrisy, in the extreme ideological violence that it justifies, and in the heightened state of depravity to which it inspires them. The second half of the chapter examines the changes that Frederick Douglass makes to his retelling of the episode in *My Bondage and My Freedom* to reveal a wealth of meaning—*encoded* in the 1845 *Narrative*'s several significant omissions—that gets lost in the deliberate contraction of his life-story to the intents and purposes of the Anti-Slavery Society. By carefully considering several incidents that are omitted from the 1845 *Narrative*, we come to recognize *My Bondage and My Freedom* as a profound expression of Douglass' rapidly expanding agency, autonomy, and intellect that draws on his remarkable capacity to shape his own personal experience into tight moral and ethical arguments to foreground the authority of black experience—his own as well as those of other captives and free black people—in ways unavailable to him in the earlier text.

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<sup>6</sup> Douglass, *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass*, 97.

## **The Paradise of Christian Enslavers and the Tartarus of Enslaved Women**

Few passages in the 1845 *Narrative* depict the tautological nature of antebellum Christian hypocrisy or its bloody impact on enslaved women with the striking lucidity of Frederick Douglass' snapshot of life at St Michael's after Thomas Auld's conversion. A complete failure of a human being, Thomas Auld exceeds all others in abject wickedness. In Christian hypocrisy, he is no different. Assessing the effect of Auld's conversion on his character, Douglass admits, "I indulged a faint hope that his conversion would lead him to emancipate his slaves, and that, if he did not do this, it would, at any rate, make him more kind and humane;" however, "disappointed in both these respects," Douglass laments, "it made him more cruel and hateful in all his ways" (52). Leaving no room for misapprehension, Douglass adds, "I believe him to have been a much worse man after his conversion than before" (52). According to Peter C. Meyer, the deterioration of Auld's already deplorable moral character after his conversion is the norm among enslavers because "the sanctification of slavery by the corruption of religion united the slaveholders' interest with their sense of duty," removing "a powerful source of moral restraint on—even as it added zeal to—their pursuit of their despotic interests."<sup>7</sup> In this, Thomas Auld is certainly not alone; soon, he finds himself at the soul-crushing center of an echo-chamber of antebellum Christian hypocrisy—a paradise of Christian enslavers conjured from the very pit of chattel slavery's Tartarus of enslaved women—unable to recognize *its* depths.

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<sup>7</sup> Peter C. Myers, *Frederick Douglass: Race and the Rebirth of American Liberalism* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 2008), 42.

Foregoing a detailed narrative of Thomas Auld's conversion, which he will add to the passage in *My Bondage and My Freedom*, Douglass offers, instead, a maxim of his own to describe the change in Auld's character: "Prior to his conversion, he relied on his own depravity to shield and sustain him in his savage barbarity; but after his conversion, he found religious sanction and support for his slaveholding cruelty."<sup>8</sup> The tight parallelism of this phrase invites close attention. Despite the overture toward antithesis, staged in the contrast between the "Prior to" and "but after" in the openings of the seven-syllable prepositional phrases that begin each line, the meanings of each line are nearly synonymous. Each word in each line is, if not the same word, a near synonym of its analog in the other line. Even the seven-syllable prepositional phrases that preface each line, "Prior to his conversion" and "but after his conversion," call attention the function of a "preface," a rhetorical performance offering a preview of a text's meaning, staged "prior to" a text "but [composed] after" the text has been written, a concept that will re-emerge later in this chapter with regard to Douglass' Appendix to the 1845 *Narrative*. These prefacing prepositional phrases also remind us that the *meaning* of Thomas Auld's "conversion" is, at best, in question (at least it will be in *My Bondage and My Freedom*) but, most likely, his conversion is of little to no significance—all sound and fury. Moving on to compare the simple subjects and simple verbs of each line, "he found" and "he relied," we notice that the parallelism between the syllable count of each line has been lost; and furthermore, if we think of "found" in the sense of having *recovered* something lost or *discovered* something new, the meaning is not at all synonymous with the

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<sup>8</sup> Douglass, *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass*, 52.

meaning of “relied” in the sense of *relied on*, or *depended on*, which the context clues in the passage seem to support as its “signified” meaning. But wait. If we think of “found” in the sense of *to found* a religion, the meaning begins to drift toward a group of “signified” meanings that orbit the idea of a *foundation*, a *base*, or any number of other things that can be *depended on* or *relied on*. Next, while Auld “relied on his own depravity to shield” in the first line, he “found religious sanction” in the second. Here, the parallelism in the syllable count, rhyme, phrases, and so on are utterly lost; however, the parallel meanings of the lines remain intact. For Auld, his “depravity,” or *sinful nature*, “prior to his conversion” does not change. In fact, Douglass is clear, here, (and will remain so throughout both versions of the account) that Auld’s “own depravity,” which “he relied on” “prior to his conversion” serves (very nearly) the same purpose as the “religious sanction” that “he found” “after his conversion” because “sanction” and “shield” become near synonyms if we think of “sanction” not in the sense of its meaning *authorization*, rather, in the sense of offering *support* or *assistance*, which often takes shape as *defense*. *To defend*, is to *shield*. It is compelling that in both lines, the four terms joined by the coordinating conjunction, “sanction and support” and “shield and sustain,” are such near synonyms that they are practically interchangeable; and, they mark a return to parallelism between the two lines in rhyme and syllable count. Similarly, there is little difference between the meaning of the eight-syllable prepositional phrase at the end of the first line, “in his savage barbarity,” and the one that ends the second line, “for his slaveholding cruelty,” as the slant rhyme and the metrical repetition calls attention to the tight parallel structure of the two lines one last time.

Despite Douglass' masterful use of parallelism in the opening lines of his snapshot of life at St. Michael's after Thomas Auld's conversion in the 1845 *Narrative*, antithesis and irony dominate his rhetorical performance throughout the passage, allowing him to unveil the tautological nature of antebellum Christian hypocrisy, its legitimations of white supremacy and patriarchy, and its devastating impact on enslaved women. The antithesis begins, ironically, in the opening lines that seem to convey such similar meanings. Having dug through the mountain of similarities between the two lines, we uncover a single pair of difference of deep significance: "Prior to his conversion," Auld "relied on *his own* depravity to shield and sustain *him* [self] in his savage barbarity [emphases mine]" (52). These differences—underscored by the deliberate balancing of the meanings of all of the other phrases around them—indicate that Thomas Auld's conversion robs him of some small capacity for self-reflection that he possessed in his depravity. This is the only significant change that Douglass registers in his character. Further, this lost capacity for self-reflection is a common characteristic of all of the Christian enslavers and most of the antebellum Christians that Douglass portrays in the 1845 *Narrative*—as this *lack* is part and parcel of the tautological nature of antebellum Christianity—so much so, that one Christian enslaver becomes barely distinguishable from another, just as post-conversion Thomas Auld is barely distinguishable from his pre-conversion self, lost in the echo-chamber of Christian hypocrisy at St. Michael's.

Douglass interrupts his reflections on the impact that Thomas Auld's conversion has on his character to expose the tautological nature of Christian hypocrisy at St. Michael's, recalling that the newly-converted Auld "made the greatest pretensions to piety ... distinguished himself among his brethren, and was soon made class leader and



exhorter” (52). Despite the subtle intimation, here, that Auld’s devotion is born of vanity, his rapid rise in the church begins to make sense in light of the hypocrisy of the church at St. Michael’s. According to Douglass, Auld’s “house was the preachers’ home,” as he recalls that a number of the local preachers “used to take great pleasure in coming there to put up; for while he starved us, he stuffed them” (52). Here, the spirit of Christian hypocrisy at St. Michael’s begins to materialize in the antithesis between the “stuffed” preachers and the “starved” captives; however, Douglass subordinates both of these terms to a third term, the “great pleasure” that the local preachers “used to take in coming” to St. Michael’s “to put up” (52). At once, two interpretive possibilities that bear heavily on the nature of the preachers’ hypocrisy present themselves. On one hand, in their hypocrisy, the preachers’ “great pleasure” in being “stuffed” renders them indifferent to the enslaved peoples’ hunger; on the other hand, in their hypocrisy, the preachers “take great pleasure” in being “stuffed” *and* delight in the hunger of the enslaved people, a far more malevolent form of hypocrisy that aligns with antebellum Christianity’s legitimization of chattel slavery’s white-supremacist status quo as well as what Douglass describes as Thomas Auld’s “meanness” (51) in not providing sufficient food for the people he has enslaved. In each case, Douglass invokes antithesis to portray the preachers’ hypocrisy as a detriment to the people held captive at St. Michael’s.

Yet, not all of the preachers who visit Thomas Auld add to the enslaved people’s suffering. Mr. George Cookman is much beloved by the captives at St Michael’s for a number of reasons. As Douglass explains: “We ... loved Mr. Cookman ... believed him to be a good man,” and “thought him very instrumental in getting Mr. Samuel Harrison, a very rich slaveholder, to emancipate his slaves; and by some means got the impression

that he was laboring to effect the emancipation of all slaves” (52). However, Cookman’s dedication to the official anti-slavery doctrine of the Methodist church is but one manifestation of his Christian orthopraxy that sets him apart from the other preachers in the eyes of the captives at St. Michael’s. Douglass points out that when Cookman “was at our house, we were sure to be called in to prayers. When others were there, we were sometimes called in and sometimes not” (52), characterizing the antithesis between Cookman’s sincerity and the other preachers’ hypocrisy as a matter of his consistency in contrast to their inconsistency. In doing so, Douglass registers another important parallel between the preachers and Thomas Auld, who “was forever the victim of inconsistency” (51). In Cookman’s case, the certainty of his calling the enslaved people in to prayers reveals his sincere concern for their spiritual well-being.

As his reflection on Cookman draw to a close, Douglass deploys antithesis and irony to great rhetorical effect to characterize the hypocrisy of the church at St. Michael’s as a pernicious case of *the blind leading the blind*, bringing the hackneyed (but appropriate) cliché to mind—rather than to the page. According to Douglass, “Mr. Cookman took more notice of us than either of the other ministers. He could not come among us without betraying his sympathy for us, and, stupid as we were, we had the sagacity to see it” (52-53). Mr. Cookman’s consistent *regard* for the enslaved people adds, yet, another level of contrast between his sincere dedication to Christian duty and the other preachers’ sincere dedication to their own antebellum Christian hypocrisy, which their patent *disregard* for the enslaved people (here, and throughout the passage) brings into increasingly sharp focus. Yet, an additional antithesis between the enslaved people—who can *see* Cookman’s conspicuous sympathy for them—and the hypocritical

preachers—who *overlook* it—is implicit in Douglass’ observation. In an ironic reversal of chattel slavery’s white-supremacist status quo, Douglass describes the captives’ ability to *see* Cookman’s sympathy as “sagacity,” implying that the preachers’ failure to *see* it indicates that they lack “sagacity.” Further, the antithesis between sagacity and stupidity in Douglass’ characterization of the captives, who demonstrate “sagacity” but are presumed to be “stupid,” suggests that the preachers, who are presumed to be clever, are, in fact, “stupid” in contrast to the enslaved people. With these ironic reversals, Douglass’ implicit antithesis between the enslaved people—who can *see*, are perceptive, and are clever—with the preachers—who cannot see, lack insight, and are stupid—effectively characterizes the church leadership at St. Michael’s as *blind*. Blinded by and blindly enslaved to their own Christian hypocrisy, they lead Thomas Auld and the Christian faithful at St. Michael’s into the proverbial pit.<sup>9</sup> Yet, what the preachers will not (or cannot) *see*, in this instance, poses far less danger to the captives at St. Michael’s than the mindless eruptions of white-supremacist ideological violence that the preachers’ *senseless* Christian hypocrisy legitimates.

Douglass concludes his illustration of the tautological nature of Christian hypocrisy at St. Michael’s in the 1845 *Narrative* with a brief paragraph about “a white

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<sup>9</sup> In Matthew 15:14, cautioning his followers against what he describes as the Pharisee’s pedantic adherence to the purification rituals of Mosaic law, Jesus reportedly tells his followers, “Let them Alone; they be the blind leaders of the blind. And if the blind lead the blind, both shall fall into the ditch” (KJV). Interestingly, the NIV translation of the same passage substitutes “pit” for “ditch,” calling attention to the New Testament’s Greco-centric references to Tartarus that loom large in my own personal reflections on that text. Douglass’ comparison between antebellum Christians and New Testament portrayals of “the Pharisees” becomes most pronounced in the Appendix to the 1845 *Narrative*.

young man, a Mr. Wilson, who proposed to keep a Sabbath school for the instruction of such slaves as might be disposed to learn to read the New Testament” (53). Douglass remembers that the Sabbath school “met but three times, when Mr. West and Mr. Fairbanks, both class-leaders, with many others, came upon us with sticks and other missiles, drove us off, and forbade us to meet again” (53). Enforcing chattel slavery’s prohibition against teaching enslaved people to read, West and Fairbanks attack Mr. Wilson and his students while they are engaged in an overtly Christian endeavor. The duplicity of their actions demonstrates the seamless integration of antebellum Christian hypocrisy into chattel slavery’s white-supremacist status quo to legitimate its ideological violence. While Douglass has, heretofore, cleverly captured the tautological nature of Christian hypocrisy at St. Michael’s, the hypocrisy of Christian enslavers is not sustained solely by the *blind* faith of the community of *believers*; it also finds support in their self-serving miss-readings of the bible, a hypocritical legitimation of chattel slavery that comes into clear focus, as Douglass registers the devastation that Thomas Auld, in the full-flower of his Christian hypocrisy, visits on a young enslaved woman, who—unnamed while under his lash—we will eventually come to know as Henny.

### **Song of My-Selves: The Indistinguishability of Christian Enslavers**

Returning to his assessment of the impact that Thomas Auld’s conversion has on his character, Douglass reminds his readers, “I have said my master found religious sanction for his cruelty. As an example, I will state one of many facts going to prove my charge” (53). What follows are some of the most disturbing images in the 1845 *Narrative*. Douglass remembers, “I have seen him tie up a lame young woman, and whip her with a heavy cowskin upon her naked shoulders, causing the warm blood to drip; and,

in justification of the bloody deed, he would quote this passage of scripture—“He that knoweth his master’s will and doeth it not, shall be beaten with many stripes” (53). The parallels between Thomas Auld and Mr. Weeden (whose story appears some time later in the 1845 *Narrative*) are unmistakable. In both instances, Douglass presents the figure of a nameless woman subjugated by the violence of a Christian enslaver; yet, here, the sanguinary quality of Douglass’ language, the “warm blood” that “drips” from her “naked shoulders,” intimates the immediacy and the doubled-agony of a body broken open in his presence, expressing an excess of suffering that spills over into the horrific image of Ceal’s “raw back” (69), a wound sustained in his absence. Additionally, Douglass’ eye-witness account of Thomas Auld, quoting scripture “in justification of the bloody deed” forges the clear connection between chattel slavery’s extreme violence and antebellum Christian theology that is lacking in his recitation of Weeden’s maxim: “Behave well or behave ill, it is the duty of a master occasionally to whip a slave, to remind him of his master’s authority” (69). Ironically, in Weeden’s maxim, the enslaver’s *duty* justifies his cruelty; any discernable sense of duty is, precisely, what is lost in Auld’s justification for his violence. Donald B. Gibson’s observes that Auld quotes Luke 12:47, “one of the two Bible verses used almost exclusively as texts for sermons preached to slaves.”<sup>10</sup> Once again, the mind-bending humor of Douglass’ wordplay portrays Thomas Auld—having received a message reserved almost exclusively for captives—as an

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<sup>10</sup> Donald B. Gibson, “Faith, Doubt, and Apostasy: Evidence of Things Unseen in Frederick Douglass’s *Narrative*,” in *Frederick Douglass: New Literary and Historical Essays*, ed. Eric J. Sundquist, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990), 89.

ideological *captive* himself, as much blindly *enslaved* to his own hypocrisy as Mr. Weeden or any of the preachers that he has “stuffed” in his pretensions to piety.

The similarities between Auld and Weeden continue to accumulate as Douglass testifies to the extreme violence of Christian enslavers through Thomas Auld’s cruelty toward Henny. Douglass recalls: “Master would keep this lacerated young woman tied up in this horrid situation four or five hours at a time. I have known him to tie her up early in the morning, and whip her before breakfast; leave her, go to his store, return at dinner, and whip her again, cutting her in the places already made raw with his cruel lash.”<sup>11</sup> Notice that just as Weeden’s “lash” is the agent of his unnamed woman’s anguish, so too is Auld’s lash. Both villains, having found religious sanction for their cruelty, torture their victims for interminable periods of time—like antebellum husbands returning, at their leisure, to their home-imprisoned, brandy-bruised wives. And, here, we arrive at one of the most peculiar and telling moments in the 1845 version of Douglass’ snapshot of life at St. Michael’s after Thomas Auld’s conversion. Midway through the passage, Douglass names the unnamed woman: “The secret of master’s cruelty toward ‘Henny’ is found in the fact of her being almost helpless” (53). However, Henny appears much earlier in the chapter when Douglass, describing the intolerable state of hunger among the captives at St. Michael’s, notes: “There were four slaves of us in the kitchen—my sister Eliza, my Aunt Pricilla, Henny, and myself” (50). It is quite significant that Douglass omits Henny’s name from his snapshot of life at St. Michael’s *only* while Auld is torturing her, calling attention to the omission by enclosing her name in quotation marks

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<sup>11</sup> Douglass, *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass*, 53.

when he reintroduces it *after* the torture scene. This omission is central to the parallel that Douglass draws between Auld and Weeden, twin images of Christian enslavers torturing unnamed women—both of whom Douglass knows by name—in the *only* two scenes in the 1845 *Narrative* that offer violent depictions of antebellum Christianity’s role in the annihilation of enslaved women’s subjectivities. Even the subtle differences in Douglass’ portrayals of Auld and Weeden call attention to the fact that the two vile men are virtually indistinguishable in the echo chamber of Christian hypocrisy at St. Michael’s.

Despite the justification that antebellum Christianity provides for their cruelty, it is unlikely that either Auld or Weeden torture their victims out of the sense of Christian duty upon which Weeden’s maxim rests because the “secret” of Thomas Auld’s cruelty toward Henny, “the fact of her being almost helpless” (53), reveals the outrageous degree to which antebellum Christian hypocrisy loses touch with what Douglass describes in the Appendix of the 1845 *Narrative* as the “the pure, peaceable, and impartial Christianity of Christ” (97). In the bible verse following the one containing Thomas Auld’s sadistic mantra, Jesus tells his disciples: “But he that knew not [his master’s will], and did commit things worthy of stripes, shall be beaten with few stripes. For unto whomsoever much is given, of him shall be much required: and to whom men have committed much, of him they will ask the more” (Lk. 12:48 [KJV]). Setting aside the figurative nature of parables for a moment (to which verse forty-one of the same chapter calls conspicuous attention), Auld’s treatment of Henny is utterly backward; she should be given few stripes. Douglass, on the other hand, should be given many according to the perverse logic of antebellum Christianity. David Blight registers this ironic reversal, pointing out that when Douglass describes his own encounters with Auld’s lash, “the proud former

slave portrays his handling of the whip as that of a hapless amateur;” by contrast, when Douglass describes Henny’s torture, Blight observes that “Auld’s piety dripped with Henny’s blood.”<sup>12</sup> Still, Douglass’ sharp focus on the “religious sanction” that the church at St. Michael’s provides for Thomas Auld’s “slaveholding cruelty”<sup>13</sup> in the 1845 *Narrative* culminates in the white-supremacist misreading of this biblical parable, which fails to recognize that the “servants” in the parable represent Christians in the service of Christ, leading Auld to mistake the authority of Christ’s divine will over The Church for his own pathetic authority over his captives, revealing, once again, the *blinding* nature of Christian hypocrisy. For Christian enslavers, biblical passages that *seem* to offer justification for their cruelty are useful, but those that condemn them for it are easily disregarded.

Wrapping up his 1845 snapshot of life at St. Michael’s after Thomas Auld’s conversion, Douglass emphasizes the ubiquity of Christian hypocrisy among enslavers and its devastating impact on the lives of enslaved women. Recalling that after much effort, “my benevolent master, to use his own words, ‘set [Henny] adrift to take care of herself’” (53), Douglass exclaims: “Here was a recently-converted man, holding on upon the mother, and at the same time turning out her helpless child, to starve and die! Master Thomas was one of the many pious slaveholders who hold slaves for the very charitable purpose of taking care of them” (53). While this observation certainly calls attention to the wide-spread hypocrisy among “charitable” Christian enslavers, much of the

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<sup>12</sup> David W. Blight, *Frederick Douglass Prophet of Freedom* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2018), 59.

<sup>13</sup> Douglass, *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass*, 52.



significance of Douglass' exclamation is utterly lost in the context of the 1845 *Narrative* because the identity of the child, Henny, is unmistakable, but who is her mother? To make sense of Douglass' cryptic exclamation referencing Henny's mother—who is not identified in the 1845 *Narrative*—we must turn to *My Bondage and My Freedom*, which sheds light on this curious omission, illuminating the easily overlooked mystery of Frederick Douglass' relationship to Henny.

### **Henny's Story in *My Bondage and My Freedom***

In *My Bondage and My Freedom*, Henny, who appears in only the one chapter of the 1845 *Narrative*, enters the story when Thomas Auld orders Hugh Auld to send Douglass to St. Michael's. In the 1845 *Narrative* Douglass simply explains that “a misunderstanding took place between” the two brothers “and as a means of punishing his brother,” Thomas Auld “took me with him to live with himself at St. Michael's” (49). In *My Bondage and My Freedom*, however, Douglass elaborates a great deal on “the ground of the misunderstanding,” which “will serve to illustrate the character of southern chivalry, and humanity,”<sup>14</sup> offering this anecdote:

Among the children of my Aunt Milly, was a daughter, named Henny.

When quite a child, Henny had fallen into the fire, and burnt her hands so bad that they were of very little use to her. Her fingers were drawn almost into the palms of her hands. She could make out to do something, but she was considered hardly worth having—of little more value than a horse with a broken leg. This unprofitable piece of human property, ill shapen,

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<sup>14</sup> Douglass, *My Bondage and My Freedom*, 242.

and disfigured, Capt. Auld sent off to Baltimore, making his brother Hugh welcome to her services. (242)

Within the first sentence, Douglass begins to clear up two of the 1845 *Narrative*'s lingering mysteries, at least partially: Henny's mother is his Aunt Milly, which makes Henny his cousin. Further, when Douglass describes Henny's childhood fall into the fire—a full chapter ahead of its disclosure in the 1845 *Narrative* as the “secret” of Auld's cruelty toward her—he adds a number of details about the severity of her injuries that heighten the reader's sense of Thomas Auld's hypocrisy in prioritizing his household expenses over Henny's life. Douglass goes on to explain that Hugh and Sophia Auld give “poor Henny a fair trial” but decide “that they had no use for a crippled servant, and they sent her back to Master Thomas,” who considers her return “an act of ingratitude, on the part of his brother; and, as a mark of his displeasure,” forces Hugh Auld “to send” Douglass “immediately to St. Michael's, saying, if he cannot keep ‘*Hen*,’ he shall not have ‘*Fred*’” (242). In this substantial elaboration of Henny's role in his life-story, Douglass reveals a great deal more than “the character of Southern chivalry, and humanity” (242). To begin with, the two are cousins, a kinship that Douglass emphasizes throughout his account of life at St. Michael in *My Bondage and My Freedom*—revising, for example, his list of the captives starving in the kitchen to include “my cousin Henny; and myself” (246), rather than just plain “Henny, and myself.”<sup>15</sup> Similarly, Douglass begins his 1855 account of Henny's brutal beating by explaining that Auld's post-conversion “cruelty and meanness were especially displayed in his treatment of my

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<sup>15</sup> Douglass, *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass*, 50.

unfortunate cousin, Henny, whose lameness made her a burden to him,”<sup>16</sup> rather than letting her go unnamed for the duration of the torture scene. Douglass’ more complete and sympathetic portrayal of Henny in *My Bondage and My Freedom* reveals the degree to which their fates are closely connected during Douglass’ adolescence, a time in his life that we have already marked as a crucial moment in the development of his subjectivity. Henny is, after all, the reason that Douglass finds himself at St. Michael’s and, ultimately, in the hands of Edward Covey. However, learning the identity of Henny’s mother is useful *only* in that it clarifies Douglass’ relationship to Henny because Aunt Milly is not with them at St. Michael’s. Despite Douglass’ elaboration of Henny’s story in *My Bondage and My Freedom*, his cryptic exclamation from the 1845 *Narrative*, “Here was a recently-converted man, holding on upon the mother, and at the same time turning out her helpless child, to starve and die!,”<sup>17</sup> remains as enigmatic as ever. Keeping in mind Jenny Franchot’s observation that the “atrocities of slavery find their most powerful synecdoche in the silenced figure of the slave mother forced to endure rape, concubinage, and the theft of her children,”<sup>18</sup> Douglass’ cryptic exclamation certainly offers a rhetorically powerful condemnation of Thomas Auld’s Christian hypocrisy for turning Henny out of his home with no means to take care of herself.

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<sup>16</sup> Douglass, *My Bondage and My Freedom*, 255.

<sup>17</sup> Douglass, *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass*, 53.

<sup>18</sup> Jenny Franchot, “The Punishment of Aunt Esther: Frederick Douglass and the Construction of the Feminine,” in *Frederick Douglass: New Literary and Historical Essays*, ed. Eric J. Sundquist, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990), 141.

Nonetheless, a comparison with the amended comment in *My Bondage and My Freedom* offers some insight into Douglass' meaning in both instances.

In 1855, Douglass writes: "Here was a recently converted man, holding, with tight grasp, the well-framed, and able bodied slaves left him by old master—the persons, who, in freedom, could have taken care of themselves; yet, turning loose the only cripple among them, virtually to starve and die."<sup>19</sup> The changes are breathtaking. To begin with, while it still offers a powerful condemnation of antebellum Christian hypocrisy, Douglass' comment is not delivered as an exclamation. Further, in the 1845 *Narrative*, Douglass describes three characters; one is male and two are female: a "recently-converted man," Thomas Auld; a "mother," not Milly; and "her helpless child," Henny.<sup>20</sup> But, in the 1855 revision, the only characters identified by their gender are "the recently-converted man," still Thomas Auld; and a new character, "old master," Aaron Anthony. The "mother" becomes "the well-framed, and able bodied slaves left him by old master," whom Douglass lists in 1855 as, "Eliza, my sister; Priscilla, my aunt ... and myself,"<sup>21</sup> another remarkable change that we will return to in chapter four. All are the former captives of Aaron Anthony. The "daughter" in the 1845 passage becomes "the only cripple among them" in 1855, still Henny. Both selections foreground the Christian hypocrisy and masculinity of the enslavers. However, in my *Bondage and My Freedom*, Douglass elevates 1845's rhetorically powerful exclamation, condemning Thomas Auld

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<sup>19</sup> Douglass, *My Bondage and My Freedom*, 255.

<sup>20</sup> Douglass, *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass*, 53.

<sup>21</sup> Douglass, *My Bondage and My Freedom*, 246.

and the mass of Christian enslavers for their hypocrisy, to a powerful assertion of enslaved people's potential to reshape the very ideas of "community" and "freedom" based on their experiences with that hypocrisy. For example, emphasizing the fact that the exchange of the enslaved takes place between two men, Douglass points out that they are "left him by old master," calling attention to the patriarchal transfer of property (inheritance) that perpetuates chattel slavery. While the passage passes judgment on the recently converted Thomas Auld for his hypocrisy, it also recognizes Christianity and patriarchy as concomitant to the passing of captives from one generation to the next. Further, while the removal of feminine identifications from the other terms replaces them with language that is, at first glance, uncomfortably ableist (to euphemize) for twenty-first century readers, in its coarse language, the passage recognizes bodily difference within the constraints of the material reality of a society that is in thrall to the ideological and hegemonic mandates of ableism, which inhere to liberal individualism. With this in mind, while the comment seems to figure "freedom" as the domain of those who, "well-framed and able-bodied," are capable of responding to liberal individualism's call to self-reliance, I contend that this is not necessarily an accurate reading. In the first place, the characters in the 1855 revision that retain the markers of liberal individualism's patriarchal dominance—their whiteness, masculinity and Christianity—are Thomas Auld and Aaron Anthony. On the other hand, Douglass describes those among the enslaved who would be/could be free as "persons" who "could have taken care of" not himself or herself, rather, "themselves," and Henny's vulnerability lies expressly in the fact that she has been expelled from "among them," a community of captives with unrealized potential

to refigure the era's severely limited (and limiting) concept of freedom into one that resists hierarchies of gender, color, religion and the pernicious myth of individualism.

The changes that Douglass makes to his treatment of Henny in *My Bondage and My Freedom* often demonstrate that a wealth of meaning—*encoded* in the 1845 *Narrative*'s omissions—gets lost in the deliberate contraction of his life-story to the intents and purposes of the Anti-Slavery Society because, as Jenny Franchot points out, “the sexual and physical abuse of the slave woman” is a “conventional feature of slave narratives and abolitionist fiction” (141). Both the prevalence and rhetorical efficacy of passages that testify to chattel slavery's extremely violent treatment of enslaved women is duly noted in recent scholarship on slave narratives. For example, in her commentary on *The History of Mary Prince, a West Indian Slave. Related by Herself*. (1831), Nicole N. Aljoe points out: “Due to Public outrage—primarily by women's abolitionist groups—over an episode on a slave ship where a captain flogged a naked slave woman to death, the Consolidated Slave Act explicitly banned the whipping of naked female slaves.”<sup>22</sup> True to form, Douglass' eye-witness account of Thomas Auld's violent subjugation of Henny lends a tremendous amount of rhetorical force to his explicit condemnation of antebellum Christianity in the 1845 *Narrative*. However, *My Bondage and My Freedom* dispenses with much of its antecedent text's capitulation to the generic conventions of anti-slavery literature. For example, the striking image of “a heavy cowskin upon *her* naked shoulders [my emphasis]”<sup>23</sup> in the 1845 *Narrative* gives way to a more subjective

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<sup>22</sup> Nicole N. Aljoe, “‘Going to Law’: Legal Discourse and Testimony in Early West Indian Slave Narratives,” *Early American Literature* 46, no. 2 (2011): 366, [doi:10.1353/eal.2011.0013](https://doi.org/10.1353/eal.2011.0013).

<sup>23</sup> Douglass, *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass*, 53.

portrayal of “Henny ... the lame and maimed woman” whom Auld would “tie up ... and whip ... in a manner most brutal, and shocking”<sup>24</sup> in *My Bondage and My Freedom*.

Similarly, rather than focusing on Thomas Auld’s brutality, which causes “the warm red blood to drip”<sup>25</sup> in the 1845 *Narrative*, Douglass emphasizes the “blood-chilling

blasphemy” with which “he would quote the passage of scripture”<sup>26</sup> in *My Bondage and My Freedom*. In breaking with the generic conventions imposed on the 1845 *Narrative*,

Douglass delivers a more compassionate portrayal of Henny, establishing the centrality of her identity and experience within his own. Ultimately, Douglass’ more complete

characterization of Henny calls attention to the remarkable amount of authority that he invests in black experience—his own as well others’—in *My Bondage and My Freedom*.

### **The Preeminence of Black Experience in *My Bondage and My Freedom***

The preeminence of black experience in *My Bondage and My Freedom* emerges from Douglass’ capacity to shape his personal experience into tight moral and ethical arguments. For example, in the chapter that contains his snapshot of life at St. Michael’s, “Experience at St. Michael’s,” Douglass recalls that food was in such short supply that the captives, “compelled either to beg, or to steal ... did both” (246). Douglass goes on to admit that “while I hated everything like stealing, as such, I nevertheless did not hesitate to take food, when I was hungry, wherever I could find it;” however, he goes on to dismiss the potential misapprehension of “this practice” as “the mere result of an

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<sup>24</sup> Douglass, *My Bondage and My Freedom*, 255.

<sup>25</sup> Douglass, *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass*, 53.

<sup>26</sup> Douglass, *My Bondage and My Freedom*, 255.

unreasoning instinct,” noting that “it was, in my case, the result of a clear apprehension of the claims of morality” (246-247). Resisting the idea that the captives at St. Michael’s are culpable for stealing food, Douglass comes to understand that taking food from Thomas Auld is not stealing; rather, it is the captives’ *right*. Douglass reasons: “Considering that my labor and person were the property of Master Thomas, and that I was by him deprived of the necessities of life necessities obtained by my own labor—it was easy to deduce the right to supply myself with what was my own” (247). Douglass admits that this exercise in formal logic forces him into somewhat of a moral dilemma: “To be sure,” he writes, “this was stealing, according to the law and gospel I heard from St. Michael’s pulpit; but I had already begun to attach less importance to what dropped from that quarter, on that point, while, as yet, I retained my reverence for religion” (247). However, Douglass describes the conditions at St. Michael’s as so dire that establishing the captives’ *right* to take food *solely* from Thomas Auld is insufficient; it “was [also] necessary,” Douglass explains, “that right to steal from *others* should be established; and this could only rest upon a wider range of generalization than that which supposed the right to steal from my master” (247). Douglass goes on to translate his personal experience with hunger at St. Michael’s into an argument for the *right* of all enslaved people to take food from any and all enslavers. Offering “a brief statement of the case,” Douglass asserts:

‘I am ... not only the slave of Thomas, but I am the slave of society at large. Society at large has bound itself, in form and in fact, to assist Master Thomas in robbing me of my rightful liberty, and of the just reward of my labor; therefore, whatever rights I have against Master Thomas, I have,



equally, against those confederated with him in robbing me of liberty. As society has marked me out as privileged plunder, on the principle of self-preservation I am justified in plundering in turn. Since each slave belongs to all; all must, therefore, belong to each.’ (247-248)

While Douglass’ reasoning reflects the elements of his portrayal of Christian enslavers in the 1845 *Narrative* that render them virtually indistinguishable as individuals in their hypocrisy, regular readers of Douglass might also recognize the voice of Madison Washington—the self-liberated fugitive from chattel slavery and protagonist of Douglass’ 1852 novella, *The Heroic Slave*—echoing in his argument. When Mr. and Mrs. Listwell—a sympathetic Ohio couple who aide in his flight—ask Washington to “throw light on the hardships of a person escaping slavery,” he tells them:

I have suffered little for want of food; but I need not tell you how I got it. Your moral code may differ from mine, as your customs and usages are different. The fact is, sir, during my flight, I felt myself robbed by society of all my just rights; that I was in an enemy’s land, who sought both my life and my liberty. They had transformed me into a brute; made merchandise of my body, and, for all the purposes of my flight, turned day into night, -- and guided by my own necessities, and in contempt of their conventionalities, I did not scruple to take bread where I could get it.<sup>27</sup>

The parallels between Washington’s response to the Listwells and Douglass’ “case” for the captives’ *right* to take food from their captors are unmistakable. Both *The Heroic*

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<sup>27</sup> Frederick Douglass, *The Heroic Slave in The Complete Works of Frederick Douglass* (Czechia: Madison & Adams Press, 2018), Kindle.

*Slave and My Bondage and My Freedom* emerge from a time in Douglass' career when, as William Decker reminds us, "he is no longer a fugitive ... no longer employed by the Anti-Slavery Society" and as "a free agent and editor based in Rochester, New York, he can hector and seduce an audience to his own satisfaction."<sup>28</sup> While Decker's comment references Douglass' public performance of "What the Fourth of July Means to the Slave" (1852), it offers a great deal of insight into the paradigm shift in Douglass' rhetorical performance between 1845 and 1855 that gives rise to the primacy of black experience in *My Bondage and My Freedom*.

Characterizing the discursive constraints that Douglass faces in telling his own story in 1845, Decker observes: "In narrating these experiences to a predominantly white audience, Douglass predictably recruits the oratorical phrasings by which he had been telling his story as an Anti-Slavery Society speaker in the four years prior to the book's publication and which had become the conventional language of abolitionist discourse" (80). In comparison to "What the Fourth of July Means to the Slave," Decker describes the 1845 *Narrative* as "expressively circumspect, the narrator sustaining a reserve by virtue of well-rehearsed oratorical gestures, hopeful but not quite certain that there will materialize for him across the color line such genuinely attentive if inconspicuous auditors as exist, say, for Madison Washington" (80). To be sure, the circumspection that Decker recognizes in the 1845 *Narrative* has, in large measure, taken flight by the time Douglass writes *My Bondage and My Freedom*. Not only does Douglass advocate for all enslaved peoples' *right* to take food from any and all enslavers, he takes a much bolder

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<sup>28</sup> William Merrill Decker, *Geographies of Flight: Phillis Wheatley to Octavia Butler* (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 2020), 80, <https://muse.jhu.edu/book/77236>.

leap forward, asserting, “I hold that the slave is fully justified in helping himself to the *gold and silver, and the best apparel of his master, or that of any other slaveholder; and that such taking is not stealing in any just sense of that word.*”<sup>29</sup> The justifiable divestment of all their worldly possessions is not the only evil to which enslavers have exposed themselves, according to Douglass. Putting a much finer point on Madison Washington’s address to the Listwells, Douglass argues: “The morality of free society can have no application to slave society. Slaveholders have made it almost impossible for the slave to commit any crime, known either to the laws of God or to the laws of man. If he steals, he takes his own; if he kills his master, he imitates only the heroes of the revolution” (248). It is as if Douglass, who has named the protagonist of his novella after two mythic heroes of the American Revolution, is writing a treatise on his own escalating militancy. As the passage draws to a close, he makes a final evaluative claim: “Slaveholders I hold to be individually and collectively responsible for all the evils which grow out of the horrid relation, and I believe they will be so held at the judgment, in the sight of a just God” (248), imbuing the passage in *My Bondage and My Freedom* with all the hell-fire and damnation of a Jeremiad, a common characteristic of Douglass’ texts from this period in his career that the 1845 *Narrative* lacks in its circumspection. Concluding the passage, Douglass hectors his 1855 audience one last time, taunting, “my kind readers are, probably, less concerned about my opinions, than about that which more nearly touches my personal experience; albeit, my opinions have, in some sort, been formed by that experience” (248). Despite the provocative tone of Douglass’ parting shot,

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<sup>29</sup> Douglass, *My Bondage and My Freedom*, 248.

it is indicative of premium that he affords to black experience throughout *My Bondage and My Freedom*, a rhetorical strategy that we will observe closely in the many of the changes that he makes to his snapshot of life at St. Michael's after Thomas Auld's conversion.

### **Eye-Witness as My-Witness: A Conversion Story**

Much of Douglass' implicit and explicit criticism of antebellum Christianity in the 1845 *Narrative* focuses on chattel slavery's degradation of white subjects, often, portraying the subjective experience of enslaved people as little more than a shameful sign of chattel slavery's degradation of their white enslavers. As Decker notes, in the 1845 *Narrative* Douglass "provides a psychology of white people caught up in the master/slave relationship," adding that "not only does he develop the obligatory rogue's gallery of slave masters, slave mistresses, overseers, and preachers, he also highlights what he looks upon as the innate goodness of whites caught up in a system that in time coarsens and destroys their human sympathies."<sup>30</sup> Accordingly in his snapshot of life at St. Michael's after Thomas Auld's conversion, Douglass focuses, primarily, on the changes in Auld's character that it affects (or fails to affect). Foregrounding black experience in *My Bondage and My Freedom*, however, Douglass, adds an eyewitness account of Thomas Auld's conversion that offers a more forceful evaluation of the Christian hypocrisy at St. Michael's, one that is informed by the authority of a multiplicity of black voices, speaking from the expertise of religious experiences that

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<sup>30</sup> Decker, *Geographies of Flight: Phillis Wheatley to Octavia Butler*, 80.

Douglass portrays as deeper and truer than those of the enslavers playing church around them. Setting the scene, Douglass recalls:

In the month of August, 1833, when I had almost become desperate under the treatment of Master Thomas, and when I entertained more strongly than ever the oft-repeated determination to run away, a circumstance occurred which seemed to promise brighter and better days for us all. At a Methodist camp-meeting, held in the Bay Side (a famous place for campmeetings) about eight miles from St. Michael's, Master Thomas came out with a profession of religion.<sup>31</sup>

Apart from the change of date—the campmeeting occurs in 1832 in the 1845 *Narrative*—two significant changes stand out. To begin with, Douglass underscores his own near-desperation, subordinating Auld's experience with religion to his own experience with Auld and characterizing Auld's conversion as a brief interruption on the timeline of his own germinating determination to escape enslavement. Secondly, Douglass describes Auld's conversion as an uncertain moment of “promise ... for all of us,” introducing the multiplicity of black voices that will resonate throughout the passage to reinforce the authority of his observations. As Douglass continues his account, a number of significant omissions from the 1845 *Narrative*, which augur “suspicions” about Thomas Auld's conversion, begin to come to light. Douglass recalls: “He had long been an object of interest to the church, and to the ministers, as I had seen by the repeated visits and lengthy exhortations of the latter” (249). By making it clear that Auld has been the target of the “stuffed” preachers' fascination for some time, Douglass characterizes his

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<sup>31</sup> Douglass, *My Bondage and My Freedom*, 249.

conversion as an act of the avaricious *grace* of their Christian hypocrisy, rather than the sublime and transformative grace of the Divine. Unveiling the base motivations behind the preachers' lengthy courtship of Auld, Douglass explains that he "was a fish quite worth catching, for he had money and standing. In the community of St. Michael's he was equal to the best citizen," and unlike the mass of the inhabitants of St. Michael's, Auld "was strictly temperate; *perhaps*, from principle, but most likely, from interest. There was very little to do for him, to give him the appearance of piety, and to make him a pillar in the church" (249-250). The series of evaluative claims involved in Douglass' assessment of Auld's value to the preachers—that Auld is "a fish quite worth catching," that he is "equal to the best citizen" of St. Michael's, not to mention that clever play on the words "principle" and "interest" that recognizes Auld's temperance as a product of his avarice—undermines "the genuineness of his conversion" (251) before Douglass can even begin to give a full account of the conspicuous insincerity of the moment.

One of the more remarkable aspects of Douglass' account of Thomas Auld's conversion in *My Bondage and My Freedom* is the demystification of antebellum Christianity's pernicious legitimization of white supremacy that begins to emerge from Douglass' painstaking description of the partitioning of space into five distinct areas at the Methodist camp-meeting at Bay Side. The "pen," where Auld's conversion takes place, is at the center of the camp, and Douglass describes it as "a rude alter fenced in, fronting the preachers' stand, with straw in it for the accommodation of mourners" (250). Outside of the pen and surrounding it on three sides, a second area is marked by "the first class of stately tents," each competing "with the other in strength, neatness, and capacity for accommodating its inmates" (250). Further out from "this first circle of tents,"

Douglass observes, “another, less imposing, which reached round the camp-ground to the speakers’ stand” (250). Describing the penultimate area of the camp-meeting, Douglass explains that beyond “this second class of tents were covered wagons, ox carts, and vehicles of every shape and size,” which “served as tents to their owners” (250). Douglass characterizes the camp-meeting’s boundary with the frenetic energy of the religious fervor it encloses, “huge fires were burning, in all directions, where roasting, and boiling, and frying, were going on, for the benefit of those who were attending to their own spiritual welfare within the circle” (250). The phrase, “within in the circle,” appears, most famously, in Douglass’ 1845 *Narrative* during his reflections on the haunting, sorrowful songs of the enslaved people that he first hears as a child on Colonel Lloyd’s plantation. Douglass recalls, “I did not, when a slave, understand the deep meaning of those rude and apparently incoherent songs. I was myself within the circle; so that I neither saw nor heard as those without might see and hear.”<sup>32</sup> To be “within the circle,” then, is to be in a state of bamboozlement, unable to fully grasp the exact nature of one’s own circumstances. Thus, Douglass’ characterization of the proselytes in the mourner’s pen as “within the circle” is an ironic reversal of great significance, particularly so, in light of his description the fifth area of the camp-meeting: “*Behind* the preachers’ stand, a narrow space was marked out for the use of the colored people. There were no seats provided for this class of persons; the preachers addressed them, ‘over the left,’ if they addressed them at all.”<sup>33</sup> Here, the segregation of camp-meeting attendees by

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<sup>32</sup> Douglass, *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass*, 24.

<sup>33</sup> Douglass, *My Bondage and My Freedom*, 250.

race and, once again, the preachers' disregard for black souls illustrate two highly effectual instances of antebellum Christianity's legitimation of white supremacy; yet, this very restriction on Douglass' movement through the spaces of the camp-meeting becomes central to his authoritative perspective on Thomas Auld's conversion.

Apart from the segregation of the congregation, the scene that unfolds at the camp-meeting is a familiar one. Douglass explains that when "the preaching was over, at every service, an invitation was given to mourners to come into the pen; and, in some cases, ministers went out to persuade men and women to come in" (250). As Auld enters the mourner's pen, Douglass recalls, "I was deeply interested in that matter, and followed; and, though colored people were not allowed either in the pen or in front of the preachers' stand, I ventured to take my stand at a sort of half-way place between the blacks and whites, where I could distinctly see the movements of mourners, and especially the progress of Master Thomas" (250). The analogy between the "stand" that Douglass takes, "a sort of half-way place between the blacks and whites," and his racial identity is unmistakable. As the son of a white man, likely Aaron Anthony, and his captive, Harriet Bailey, Douglass often intimates the degree to which being *mixed* marks his *apartness* from the great mass of enslaved people.<sup>34</sup> For example, after a failed attempt to escape from William Freeland implicating two of the family's *favorite* captives, Betsey Freeland rails at the young Douglass, "'*You devil! You yellow devil!* It was you that put into the heads of Henry and John to run away. But for you, you long-

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<sup>34</sup> Hortense J. Spillers, "Notes on an Alternative Model—Neither/Nor," in *Black, White, and in Color: Essays on American Literature and Culture* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2003). 301-318. Spillers' discussion of "mulatto-ness" is useful here.



legged mulatto devil! Henry nor John would ever have thought of such a thing.”<sup>35</sup> Given her kindness toward Henry and John—bringing them biscuits before they are taken to jail—and her failure to understand that their attempt to escape does, in fact, indicate their utter displeasure with their situation, Betsey Freeland has mistaken her captives’ compliance for contentment, and quite possibly love, much like those who hear the songs of the enslaved people and make “the great mistake to suppose them happy because they sing.”<sup>36</sup> In her bamboozlement, Betsey Freeland is very much “within the circle” of the ideology of enslavement in much the same way that Auld, in the mourner’s pen, is “within the circle” of antebellum Christian hypocrisy. Douglass, on the other hand, in his “sort of halfway place” is no longer “within the circle” of the mourners. As William Decker reminds us, Douglass’ reflections on the songs of the enslaved and the pain that they express situate “Douglass and his reader outside of—but proximate to—the expressive culture of Eastern Shore black life. As one formerly situated inside that world, Douglass can interpret the meaning, but only as someone who has achieved a position exterior to it.”<sup>37</sup> In much the same way, Douglass’ authority to express doubt about Thomas’ Auld’s conversion emerges from his own past experience “within the circle” of mourners, one that he can make sense of from his “exterior” position. As Douglass goes on to explain:

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<sup>35</sup> Douglass, *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass*, 77.

<sup>36</sup> Douglass, *My Bondage and My Freedom*, 185.

<sup>37</sup> Decker, *Geographies of Flight: Phillis Wheatley to Octavia Butler*, 81.

“If he has got religion,” thought I, “he will emancipate his slaves; and if he should not do so much as this, he will, at any rate, behave toward us more kindly, and feed us more generously than he has heretofore done.”

Appealing to my own religious experience, and judging my master by what was true in my own case, I could not regard him as soundly converted, unless some such good results followed his profession of religion.<sup>38</sup>

This serves as an elaboration of Douglass’ admission in the 1845 *Narrative* that he “indulged in a faint hope that [Auld’s] conversion would lead him to emancipate his slaves, and that, if he did not do this, it would, at any rate, make him more kind and humane.”<sup>39</sup> Douglass’ commentary, here, emphasizes his position “exterior” to the conversion process, anticipating the degree to which his assessment of Thomas Auld’s conversion will rely on a combination of the authority of his personal experience and familiarity with official Methodist doctrine, often, in dialogue with the experiences and theological expertise of other enslaved people.

As an eye-witness to Auld’s conversion, Douglass recalls: “There was something in his appearance that, in my mind, cast a doubt over his conversion. Standing where I did, I could see his every movement,” reinforcing the primacy of his personal experience as well as his unique perspective, exterior to, both, the circle of converts and the racially segregated spaces of the camp-meeting. Douglass goes on to explain:

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<sup>38</sup> Douglass, *My Bondage and My Freedom*, 250.

<sup>39</sup> Douglass, *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass*, 52.

I watched narrowly while he remained in the little pen; and although I saw that his face was extremely red, and his hair disheveled, and though I heard him groan, and saw a stray tear halting on his cheek, as if inquiring “which way shall I go?”—I could not wholly confide in the genuineness of his conversion. The hesitating behavior of that tear-drop and its loneliness, distressed me, and cast a doubt upon the whole transaction, of which it was a part.<sup>40</sup>

While Auld’s conversion displays several of the hallmarks that Douglass associates with a sincere conversion, the single, hesitant tear seems inconsistent with his own experiences in the mourners’ pen, which in its name alone suggests that Auld’s disheveled hair and red-faced groaning ought to be accompanied by a flood of tears—rather than a single tear, lacking even the conviction to find its way down his cheek. However, according to Douglass, “people said, ‘*Capt. Auld had come through,*’ and it was for me to hope for the best. I was bound to do this, in charity, for I, too, was religious, and had been in the church full three years, although now I was not more than sixteen years old” (251). The “people” to whom Douglass refers, here, are most likely enslaved people, those same “inapt scholars” to whom he refers earlier in the chapter when he writes: “We seldom called him [Thomas Auld] ‘master,’ but generally addressed him by his ‘bay craft’ title—‘*Capt. Auld*’” (249). However, in dialogue with a multiplicity of black Christian voices (all likely hoping for the best out of a sense of charity) Douglass grounds his suspicions about Auld’s conversion in the contrast between his actions and the official doctrine of

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<sup>40</sup> Douglass, *My Bondage and My Freedom*, 251.

“the Methodist Discipline,” which declares that “we are much as ever convinced of the great evil of slavery; therefore, no slaveholder shall be eligible to any official station in our church” (251). By couching his obligation “to hope for the best” in the “charity” of his Christianity, underscoring his years of experience in the church at such a young age, and raising questions about the sincerity of Auld’s conversion based on his own familiarity with Methodist orthodoxy, Douglass foregrounds his own spiritual and theological expertise, calling our attention to his own conversion narrative, which appears in Chapter XII of *My bondage and My Freedom*, and provides a compelling contrast to his account of Auld in the Mourner’s pen.

Like his account of Thomas Auld’s conversion, Douglass’ own conversion narrative is conspicuously missing from his 1845 *Narrative*. Describing his own conversion, Douglass remembers: “I was not more than thirteen years old, when I felt the need of God, as a father and protector. My religious nature was awakened by the preaching of a white Methodist minister, named Hanson” (231). At this point, Douglass makes it clear that his conversion is not complete, explaining, “I cannot say that I had a very distinct notion of what was required of me; but one thing I knew very well—I was wretched, and had no means of making myself otherwise” (231). It is only after Douglass “consulted a good colored man, named Charles Johnson,” who “in tones of holy affection ... told me to pray, and what to pray for” that he “finally found that change of heart which comes by ‘casting all one’s care’ upon God, and by having faith in Jesus Christ the Redeemer, Friend, and Savior of those who diligently seek Him” (231). In contrast to the transience of Thomas Auld’s conversion, Douglass recalls that he “was, for weeks, a poor, brokenhearted mourner, traveling through the darkness and misery of doubts and

fears” (231). It is little wonder that Auld’s brief stint in the mourner’s pen does little to impress Douglass of the authenticity of his conversion. What is more significant, however, is that Douglass’ conversion narrative—which recognizes the influence of the white minister, Hanson, in awakening his religious nature—foregrounds the spiritual authority of a black man, Charles Johnson, without whose help, Douglass, like Auld, might have lingered in his wretched pre-conversion state. Following his conversion, Douglass remembers: “The desire for knowledge increased, and especially did I want a thorough acquaintance with the contents of the bible” (231), and he describes himself gathering “scattered pages from this holy book, from the filthy street gutters of Baltimore” (231-232). “While thus religiously seeking knowledge,” Douglass recalls, “I became acquainted with a good old colored man, named Lawson” (232). Lawson becomes a spiritual mentor for Douglass, who explains: “The old man could read a little, and I was a great help to him, in making out the hard words, for I was a better reader than he. I could teach him *‘the letter,’* but he could teach me *‘the spirit;’* and high, refreshing times we had together, in singing, and praying and glorifying God” (232). Douglass goes on to assert that “my chief instructor, in matters of religion, was Uncle Lawson. He was my spiritual father; and I loved him intensely, and was at his house every chance I got;” however, Douglass laments: “This pleasure was not long allowed me. Master Hugh became averse to my going to Father Lawson’s, and threatened to whip me if I ever went there again” (232-233). Despite Hugh Auld’s threat, Douglass continues to visit Father Lawson. Ultimately, Lawson is a powerful influence on the extraordinary trajectory that Douglass’ life takes. According to Douglass:

The advice and the suggestions of Uncle Lawson, were not without their influence upon my character and destiny. He threw my thoughts into a channel from which they have never entirely diverged. He fanned my already intense love of knowledge into a flame, by assuring me that I was to be a useful man in the world ... When I told him that ‘I was a slave, and a slave FOR LIFE,’ he said, ‘the Lord can make you free, my dear ... If you want liberty,’ said the old man, ‘ask the Lord for it, *in faith*, AND HE WILL GIVE IT TO YOU. (233)

Douglass closes his conversion narrative with a testimony to the truth of Lawson’s teaching: “With all other blessings sought at the mercy seat, I always prayed that God would, of His great mercy, and in His own good time, deliver me from my bondage” (233). In his commentary on the passage, Steven Mailloux has observed that, “Douglass juxtaposes descriptions of his Christian ‘awakening’ with that of his discovery of abolition,”<sup>41</sup> while David Blight notes that in “his autobiographical memory, Douglass fashions his emerging teenage literacy as his ‘means’ of escape from slavery.”<sup>42</sup> Without a doubt, Douglass’ conversion narrative merges his growing awareness of anti-slavery activism and adolescent quest for literacy into his sincere devotion to what he describes in the Appendix of the 1845 *Narrative* as “the pure, peaceable, and impartial Christianity of Christ,”<sup>43</sup> and the three become inseparable in his passage from bondage to freedom in

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<sup>41</sup> Steven Mailloux, “Political Theology in Douglass and Melville,” in *Frederick Douglass & Herman Melville Essays in Relation*, eds. Robert S. Levine and Samuel Otter, (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2008), 167.

<sup>42</sup> Blight, *Frederick Douglass Prophet of Freedom*, 54-55.

<sup>43</sup> Douglass, *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass*, 97.

his 1855 account of his life. By attributing the fulfillment of his conversion and increase in spiritual knowledge to black men, Johnson and Lawson, Douglass foregrounds black experience in his own conversion narrative in much the same that he prioritizes it in his account of Thomas Auld's conversion. Similarly, by portraying Hugh Auld as the shadow of chattel slavery's white-supremacist status quo intent on blocking his path to spiritual knowledge (and, ultimately, to freedom) with violence, Douglass' anticipates the role that Thomas Auld and the preachers will play in the final changes to his snapshot of life at St. Michael's

### **To Reiterate: The Violence of Christian Hypocrisy**

It is useful to pause, here, to consider the changes that Douglass makes to his treatment of Rev, George Cookman and the young, white minister named Mr. Wilson in the 1855 version of his snapshot of life at St. Michael's after Thomas Auld's conversion. While Cookman remains the antithesis of antebellum Christian hypocrisy, Douglass offers a more complete characterization of him, one that praises his noble qualities but registers his short-comings, as well. For example, Douglass retains the sympathetic quality of Cookman's relation to the captives at St, Michael's, observing that he "kindly took an interest in our temporal and spiritual welfare," the antithesis of those "ambassadors of the gospel of slavery," who, "seemed almost as unconcerned about our getting to heaven, as they were about our getting out of slavery."<sup>44</sup> However, Douglass notes, "he really had a good deal of genuine anti-slavery feeling mingled with his colonization ideas" (253). Douglass' vehement opposition to the colonization schemes of

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<sup>44</sup> Douglass, *My Bondage and My Freedom*, 252-253.

the period is well-documented, or as David Blight put it, “nothing prompted his ire quite like the recurring machinations of colonizationists, who could only imagine an American future through the impulse, as he put it, of ‘out with the Negroes.’”<sup>45</sup> Nonetheless, Douglass offers two poignant remembrances of Cookman that are omitted from the 1845 *Narrative* that emphasize the enslaved people’s love for him. “Great was the sorrow of all the slaves, when this faithful preacher of the gospel was removed from the Talbot county circuit,” Douglass recalls; and, rather than setting Cookman adrift in the oblivion of the unrecorded moments of his personal history, Douglass gives an account of his tragic death in 1841: “Mr. Cookman ... was an Englishman by birth, and perished while on his way to England, on board the ill-fated “President”. Could the thousands of slaves in Maryland know the fate of the good man, to whose words of comfort they were so largely indebted, they would thank me for dropping a tear on this page, in memory of their favorite preacher, friend and benefactor.”<sup>46</sup> In the image of Douglass dropping a tear on the page while in the very act of recording these memories is an example of his mastery of syncretic phrasing, which Robert Stepto has so famously expressed his admiration for, describing it as “Douglass’ ability to conjoin past and present, and to do so with images that not only stand for different periods in his personal history but also, in their fusion, speak to his evolution from slavery to freedom.”<sup>47</sup> In his final reflections on Cookman in *My Bondage and My Freedom*, Douglass’ demonstrates a compellingly Christian

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<sup>45</sup> Blight, *Frederick Douglass Prophet of Freedom*, 238.

<sup>46</sup> Douglass, *My Bondage and My Freedom*, 253.

<sup>47</sup> Robert B. Stepto, *From Behind the Veil: A study of Afro-American Narrative* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1991), 20.



capacity to love, admire, and respect a person on the other side of the color line, whose political views are, in many ways, the very antithesis of his own; but, more importantly, in the passage's final syncretic phrase, Douglass recognizes Cookman's contribution to his own journey from bondage to freedom, a white man who, despite his ideological flaws, seems to recognize and appreciate, in his own way, the authority of black experience.

Possibly the most striking aspect of Douglass' treatment of Mr. Wilson in *My Bondage and My Freedom*—the “white young man ... who proposed to keep a Sabbath school”<sup>48</sup> in the 1845 *Narrative*—lies in the fact that he becomes little more than a (major) supporting character in the drama between Frederick Douglass and Thomas Auld—who is completely, utterly, and entirely omitted from Douglass' three-sentence account of the Sabbath School debacle in 1845. In 1855, the passage, which begins: “But let me return to Master Thomas, and to my experience, after his conversion,”<sup>49</sup> quickly becomes focused on the conflict that ensues over Douglass' role in the Wilson's Sabbath school. Douglass recalls that despite Hugh and Sophia Auld's prohibitions against his education, “I could, occasionally, get into a Sabbath school, among the free children, and receive lessons, with the rest; but, having already learned both to read and to write, I was more of a teacher than a pupil, even there” (253). By contrast, he explains that “at the house of Master Thomas, I was neither allowed to teach, nor to be taught” (253-254). Douglass has not only given Thomas Auld a lead role in the story, but he has also

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<sup>48</sup> Douglass, *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass*, 53.

<sup>49</sup> Douglass, *My Bondage and My Freedom*, 253.

expanded his *own* role, true to the spirit of the other changes we have observed in *My Bondage and My Freedom*. When Douglass observes that the “whole community—with but a single exception, among the whites—frowned upon everything like imparting instruction either to slaves or to free colored persons,” Mr. Wilson, finally, enters the story as the “single exception” (254). Despite his diminished role in the unfolding drama, Wilson’s presence in both the 1845 and 1855 versions of the episode serves a similar rhetorical purpose, to provide a contrast to the Christian hypocrisy of the Community of enslavers at St. Michael’s. However, when Douglass goes on to describe him as “a pious young man,” who “asked me, one day, if I would like to assist him in teaching a little Sabbath school, at the house of a free colored man in St. Michael’s, named James Mitchell,” a range of contrasts appear that the 1845 *Narrative* lacks. To begin with, now that the focus of the episode has shifted to the conflict between Thomas Auld and Frederick Douglass, the “pious” Mr. Wilson presents an explicit contrast to the “seemings of piety” (252) that Douglass observes in Thomas Auld immediately after his conversion and the “greatest profession of piety” (252) that marks Douglass’ 1855 account of his rise in in the church. Further, the presence of “a free colored man in St. Michael’s,” who owns a home, adds a remarkable dimension to characterization of the social milieu of St. Michael’s, which he portrays in the 1845 *Narrative* as an enclave of Christian hypocrisy populated entirely by enslavers and their captives, reminding us why David Blight, who has described *My Bondage and My Freedom* as, “arguably the greatest of all slave narratives,”<sup>50</sup> also describes it as Douglass’ “ultimate declaration of independence” (253).

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<sup>50</sup> Blight, *Frederick Douglass Prophet of Freedom*, 251.

Douglass recalls that “Mr. Wilson soon mustered up a dozen old spelling books, and a few testaments,”<sup>51</sup> and, even the episode continues, the founder of the Sabbath School’s role in the account is complete. Notably, the two men attributed with breaking up Sabbath School in 1845, West and Fairbanks, are joined in 1855 by “a mob ... and Master Thomas,” who, again, does not appear in the episode in the 1845 *Narrative*, amplifying the earlier version’s portrayal of Christian enslavers as virtually indistinguishable in their hypocrisy. Further, Douglass emphasizes his 1845 intimation that a remarkable capacity for extreme ideological violence looms just behind the thin veil of Christian hypocrisy’s piety, recalling that “One of this pious crew told me, that as for my part, I wanted to be another Nat Turner; and if I did not look out, I should get as many balls into me, as Nat did into him” (254). In conclusion, Douglass observes: “It was not merely the agency of Master Thomas, in breaking up and destroying my Sabbath school, that shook my confidence in the power of southern religion to make men wiser or better; but I saw in him all the cruelty and meanness, after his conversion, which he had exhibited before he made a profession of religion” (255). Apart from dispossessing Mr. Wilson of the Sabbath school, Douglass’ comments call our attention to his outright polemic against antebellum Christianity in the Appendix of the 1845 *Narrative*, demonstrating that his experiences with Thomas Auld and the Christian hypocrisy he observes at St. Michael’s, in large part, contribute to his forceful denunciation of it.

The Appendix of Frederick Douglass’ 1845 *Narrative* is an eclectic document by any account. Five prose paragraphs of varied length—strategically interrupted by two

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<sup>51</sup> Douglass, *My Bondage and My Freedom*, 254.

lyrical texts— it is, at once, an anti-slavery polemic within a treatise on political theology, a Jeremiad delivered in poetic verse, and an unknown white minister’s “parody” on religious hypocrisy that longs to be sung. But most of all, from the first two words beneath its title, “I find,”<sup>52</sup> to the final self-reflexive utterance announcing his signature, “I subscribe myself” (100), the Appendix is a profound expression of Douglass’ rapidly expanding agency, autonomy, and intellect that prefaces *My Bondage and My Freedom* as emphatically as it clarifies the terms of his explicit condemnation of Christianity in the 1845 *Narrative*. Proceeding from our discussion of Douglass’ explicit critique of antebellum Christianity, the next chapter reflects on a series of passages in *My Bondage and My Freedom* and *Life and Times* that characterize domestic ideology as the *sine qua non* of chattel slavery. In these texts, Douglass exposes the role of *family* in relegating enslaved women and their children to what Hortense Spillers has described as a “kinless”<sup>53</sup> social status, ensuring their *legal* transfer as property from generation to generation of white men over the hundreds of years of Anglo-American history leading up to the American Civil War.

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<sup>52</sup> Douglass, *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass*, 97.

<sup>53</sup> Hortense J. Spillers, “Mama’s Baby, Papa’s Maybe: An American Grammar Book,” *Diacritics* 17, no. 2 (1987): 64-81, 74.

## CHAPTER IV

### FREDERICK DOUGLASS' SUBTLE SUBVERSION OF ANTEBELLUM DOMESTIC IDEOLOGY IN *MY BONDAGE AND MY FREEDOM*

As we have noticed, the contraction of Frederick Douglass' life story to the conventions of Anti-Slavery discourse in the 1845 *Narrative* gives rise to characterizations of enslaved women that portray them as inert, nameless objects of their captors' violence. As such, enslaved women are little more than evidence of the depravity of their enslavers. In *My Bondage and my Freedom*, however, free from the editorial constraints imposed on the 1845 *Narrative* by his Anti-Slavery Society sponsors, Frederick Douglass offers more personal and humane portrayals of the women whose pain and dispossession have shaped his subjectivity. Douglass' iconoclastic approach to telling his life story in *My Bondage and My Freedom* allows him to establish his own discursive and rhetorical conventions, redefining the genre and producing what David Blight has described as "the greatest of all slave narratives."<sup>1</sup> This chapter examines Douglass' sustained focus on the complex familial relationships—both biological and

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<sup>1</sup> David Blight, David W. Blight, *Frederick Douglass Prophet of Freedom* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2018), 250.

social—among and between enslaved people and their enslavers in *My Bondage and My Freedom*. By exposing the violence inherent within the familial relationships described in *My Bondage and My Freedom*, Douglass stages an effective subversion of paternalism,<sup>1</sup> the cornerstone of the Antebellum Era’s deeply flawed domestic ideology, the myth of the plantation family.<sup>2</sup>

This chapter begins with close readings of the handful of times that Frederick Douglass describes himself as “in the family” of his former captors in the 1845 *Narrative* to register the degree to which he characterizes “family” as a term of exclusion, rather than inclusion in his first autobiography. Even at times when family seems to indicate his close personal connection to people, the violence and alienation of Douglass’ experiences as human chattel undermine that connection, and we come to understand that for the millions of people enslaved in the antebellum South, family ties are a rare privilege, a conditional reward for continued cooperation and docility that can be restricted or

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<sup>1</sup> Nathaniel Windon, “Superannuated: Old Age on the Antebellum Plantation,” *American Quarterly* 71, no. 3 (September, 2019): 768, <https://doi.org/10.1353/aq.2019.0053>. Windon’s pithy definition of paternalism, “the belief that the sympathetic impulse of plantation owners could be trusted to temper greed when it came to determining the treatment of the laborers they enslaved,” is useful, here.

<sup>2</sup> Eric Lott, *Love and Theft: Blackface Minstrelsy and the American Working Class*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995). Lott’s commentary on images of plantation paternalism in minstrelsy’s caricature of plantation life is quite useful in recognizing paternalism’s broader implications for antebellum society. He writes, “Domestic ideology was so ubiquitous and organizing metaphor in nineteenth-century America that its imagery allowed dangerously easy reference from sector to sector of the social formation ... Taking its energy from the realities and ideologies of domestic life, the mythology of plantation paternalism became a figure for the family in America. Central to this figure was the masters strict but gentle management of the antic blacks who surround him ... From one angle, the slavemaster was proof of the benignity of the Law, of a patriarchy that ruled with a feather touch, goaded and run around he might be, but lovingly serenaded he always was, firm father to the last (194).

severed entirely at their captors' discretion, arguably chattel slavery's cruelest form of punishment. Before moving on to examine Douglass' full-scale rhetorical assault on antebellum domestic ideology in *My Bondage and My Freedom*, we recognize its nascence in his 1845 account of the valuation and division of the Anthony family's property upon the untimely death of Aaron Anthony, a scene that reveals the fundamental condition of antebellum domestic ideology that paternalism obscures: for enslaved people, to be "in the family" means to be forever bound to it as chattel.

Turning to *My Bondage and My Freedom*, we notice in its highly-curated images of black family-life that Douglass fashions inclusive models of the plantation family that, in a number of ways, undermine its paternalist myth of the kind and loving *master* surrounded by adoring *slaves*, generously ministering to their every need in pastoral scenes of plantation life. Beginning with Douglass' much-elaborated account of his early childhood among the "large family of children" in his grandmothers' "little hut,"<sup>3</sup> which calls attention to what William Andrews has described as the "social and economic hierarchies that governed the roles and responsibilities of both free whites and enslaved blacks,"<sup>4</sup> we examine a series passages that are either significantly revised from the 1845 *Narrative* or that appear first the first time in *My Bondage and My Freedom*—the valuation and division of property; the "whippings" of two of the most highly-privileged

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<sup>3</sup> Frederick Douglass, *My Bondage and My Freedom* in *Autobiographies*, ed. Henry Louis Gates Jr., 1st Library of America college ed., (New York: Library of America, 1996), 142.

<sup>4</sup> William L. Andrews, *Slavery and Class in the American South: A Generation of Slave Narrative and Testimony, 1840-1865* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2019), 152. DOI:10.1093/oso/9780190908386.001.0001.

enslaved members of Colonel Lloyd's plantation family, Nelly Ellem and Edward Wilks; and Douglass reflections on his own plantation family patriarch, Aaron Anthony, and his much-discussed beating of Douglass' Aunt Esther. Close readings of these passages lead us to consider how Douglass' emphasis on the authority of black experience in *My Bondage and My Freedom* gives rise to more-nuanced explorations of how chattel slavery exploits antebellum domestic ideology, dividing the plantation family according to race, denying its enslaved family members (often the biological brother, sisters, and cousins of their free, white counterparts) of what Hortense Spillers describes as the "vertical transfer of a bloodline, of a patronymic, of titles and entitlements, of real estate and the prerogatives of 'cold cash,'" <sup>5</sup> forcing them "into the horizontal relatedness of language groups, discourse formations, bloodlines, names, and properties by the legal arrangements of enslavement" (75), but allowing them to develop "certain ethical and sentimental features [of family] that tied her and him, across the landscape to others" to ensure their continued and continual enslavement, imbricating enslaved people in world of alienation and estrangement, a cruel and kinless disruption of the self that is reinforced by the ever-present threat of ideological violence.

#### **"In the Family": Family Values in the 1845 Narrative**

A particularly telling moment in Frederick Douglass' explicit condemnation of antebellum Christianity in the Appendix of his 1845 *Narrative* portends his full-scale assault on antebellum domestic ideology in *My Bondage and My Freedom*. Pointing out the hypocrisy of Christian enslavers—who espouse the conventional, conservative

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<sup>5</sup> Hortense J. Spillers, "Mama's Baby, Papa's Maybe: An American Grammar Book," *Diacritics* 17, no. 2 (1987): 64-81, 74.



Christian rhetoric of *family values* while preventing their captives from practicing those very values—Douglass writes: “He who is the religious advocate of marriage robs whole millions of its sacred influence, and leaves them to the ravages of wholesale pollution. The warm defender of the sacredness of the family relation is the same that scatters whole families,—sundering husbands and wives, parents and children, sisters and brothers—leaving the hut vacant, and the hearth desolate.”<sup>6</sup> This passage—one of only a handful of times that the word “family” appears in the 1845 *Narrative*—epitomizes Douglass’ treatment of “family” as a term of alienation, rather than inclusion, to describe the impact of antebellum domestic ideology on the lives of enslaved people in his first autobiography. Even in instances when “family” seems to signify a connectedness between the enslaved and their enslavers, the grand-narrative of Douglass’ experiences as chattel undermines the connection. Early in the *Narrative*, for example, Douglass observes that his “master’s family consisted of two sons, Andrew and Richard; one daughter, Lucretia, and her husband, Captain Thomas Auld,” who “lived in one house, upon the home plantation of Colonel Edward Lloyd,” and goes on to note, “I spent two years of childhood on this plantation in my old master’s family” (20). While Douglass includes himself *in* the Anthony family, here, when he goes to live with Thomas Auld at St. Michael’s later in the *Narrative*, he recalls, “It was now more than seven years since I lived with him in the family of my old master on Colonel Lloyd’s plantation. We of course were now almost entire strangers to each other” (50). While their unfamiliarity with each other can be attributed to the passage of time, Douglass goes on to explain that

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<sup>6</sup> Frederick Douglass, *Narrative of The Life of Frederick Douglass, An American Slave. Written by Himself in Autobiographies*, ed. Henry Louis Gates Jr., 1st Library of America college ed., (New York: Library of America, 1996), 97-98.

Auld “was to me a new master, and I to him a new slave. I was ignorant of his temper and disposition; he was equally so of mine. A very short time, however, brought us into full acquaintance with each other” (50), suggesting that their estrangement has more to do with their wildly contrasting positions *in* the family. To Thomas Auld, the son-in-law, Douglass is a fungible chattel that he lawfully inherits, a reading that a glance at the same passage in *My Bondage and My Freedom* confirms, when Douglass explains, “We were almost entire strangers to each other; for, when I knew him at the house of my old master, it was not as a master, but simply as “Captain Auld,” who had married old master’s daughter.”<sup>7</sup> For enslaved people, to be “in the family” means that they are held captive, not embraced by it.

Even though passages that address the nature of the relationships between enslavers and their enslaved family members as directly as the one above are somewhat scant, Douglass manages to effectively demonstrate the centrality of the paternalist myth of the plantation family to the perpetuation of chattel slavery in several key episodes of the 1845 *Narrative*. Describing the “holiday” season between Christmas and New Year’s Day, for example, Douglass reports that the enslaved people “were not required to perform any labor, more than to feed and take care of the stock,” observing that “Those of us who had families at a distance, were generally allowed to spend the whole six days in their society.”<sup>8</sup> Emphasizing the contrast between “staid, sober, thinking, and industrious” enslaved people and the “far larger part,” who “engaged in search sports and

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<sup>7</sup> Douglass, *My Bondage and My Freedom*, 245.

<sup>8</sup> Douglass, *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass*, 66.

merriments as playing ball, wrestling, running foot-races, fiddling, dancing, and drinking whiskey,” Douglass notes that “this latter mode of spending the time was by far the most agreeable to the feelings of our masters,” asserting that it “was deemed a disgrace not to get drunk at Christmas” (66). Ultimately, Douglass contends that should “the slaveholders at once to abandon this practice ... it would lead to an immediate insurrection among the slaves,” explaining that the “holidays serve as conductors, or safety-valves, to carry off the rebellious spirit of enslaved humanity” (66). While Douglass seems to be suggesting that the debauchery of the week is as vital to the perpetual motion of chattel slavery’s agricultural machine as releasing steam is to the integrity of the era’s rudimentary steam engines, Saidiya V. Hartman calls our attention to his protracted version of the episode in *Life and Times*, emphasizing his “condemnation of these diversions for cultivating submission, debasement, and docility”<sup>9</sup> among the enslaved people. While Hartman recognizes that in his “searing criticism of these amusements” Douglass “concentrated on their function as ‘safety valves,’” she also registers “a longing for a culture of resistance in this condemnation” (47). Reading the passage alongside Douglass’ commentary on “slave song” in the 1845 *Narrative*, Hartman contends that “Douglass yearns for ... dangerous music and dangerous thought,” arguing that “the relentlessness of the critique and its broad strokes are intent upon destroying the discourse on indolence, servility, and contentment that licensed the institution” (47-48). With this in mind, it is significant that Douglass closes the episode in both *My Bondage and My Freedom* and *Life and Times* with an unmistakable intimation

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<sup>9</sup> Saidiya V. Hartman, *Scenes of Subjection: Terror, Slavery, and Self-Making in Nineteenth-Century America*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997), 47.

of the potential for insurrection roiling within the hearts of the enslaved people. In *My Bondage and My Freedom* he writes, “It is the sober, thinking slave who is dangerous, and needs the vigilance of his master, to keep him a slave,”<sup>10</sup> a sentiment that he reiterates in *Life and Times*, but in the past tense. However, Hartman also reminds us of the enslavers’ obsession with increasing their captives’ productivity, explaining that “Plantation journals, guided by paternalistic ideals and anxious about the image of the institution of slavery, particularly in light of mounting opposition to slavery, not surprisingly were much more forthright about the use of rewards and recreation rather than violence to achieve submission.”<sup>11</sup> Attendant to the enslavers’ authority to reward their captives with *free time* to spend with their distant families on the holidays, the power to utterly sever those tenuous ties forever stands as one of chattel slavery’s cruelest forms of punishment.

Early in the *Narrative*, Douglass illustrates how the uncertainty of family ties, deployed as a form of punishment, compels enslaved people to comply with their captors’ whims in even the most trivial matters of daily life. Comparing his wealth to “the riches of Job,” Douglass reports that Colonel Lloyd, “said to own a thousand slaves,” in truth, “owned so many that he did not know them when he saw them; nor did all the slaves of the out-farms know him.”<sup>12</sup> According to Douglass, “while riding along the road one day,” Lloyd accosts an enslaved man “in the usual manner of speaking to colored people

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<sup>10</sup> Douglass, *My Bondage and My Freedom*, 292.

<sup>11</sup> Hartman, *Scenes of Subjection*, 46.

<sup>12</sup> Douglass, *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass*, 27.

on the public highways of the south,” asking him, ““Well, boy, whom do you belong to?”” (27). Failing to recognize his enslaver, the man reveals that he is, in fact, the captive of Colonel Lloyd, who probes further, ““Well, does the colonel treat you well?,”” to which, ““No, sir,’ was the ready reply” (27). Upon further questioning, the enslaved man confesses that Lloyd gives him enough to eat, ““such as it is,”” (27) but he is overworked. Colonel Lloyd, “after ascertaining where the slave belonged, rode on; the man also went on about his business, not dreaming that he had been conversing with his master” (27); however, weeks later the enslaved man is “informed by his overseer that, for having found fault with his master, he was now to be sold to a Georgia trader,” and according to Douglass, “was immediately chained and handcuffed; and thus, without a moment’s warning, he was snatched away, and forever sundered, from his family and friends, by a hand more unrelenting than death” (27). For Douglass, this anecdote illustrates the reason that enslaved people, “when inquired of as to their condition and the character of their masters, almost universally say they are contented, and that their masters are kind” (27) rather than disclosing the deep misery of their captivity to strangers, an implicit rebuttal of the conventional, paternalist pro-slavery argument that enslaved people are content and suited to their enslavement.<sup>13</sup> Citing his own experience as an example, Douglass recalls,

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<sup>13</sup> David F. Ericson, *The Debate Over Slavery: Antislavery and Proslavery Liberalism in Antebellum America* (New York: New York university Press, 2000), [doi:10.18574/9780814722909](https://doi.org/10.18574/9780814722909). Ericson cites an example of this type of argument in James H. Hammond’s “controversial House speech of February 1, 1836, opposing the reception of abolitionist petitions to congress in Strident defense of slavery” (123). Ericson reports that Hammond argued, “abolishing Southern slavery ... can never be shown to be in the interest of the slaves, for ‘there is not a happier, more contented race up on the face of the earth then our slaves’ (p. 36). They, furthermore, ‘have every reason to be happy’ because they are ‘lightly tasked, well clothed, well fed’ ... and because ‘their lives and persons [are] protected by law, all their sufferings alleviated by the kindest and most interested care, and their domestic affections cherished and maintained.’

“I have been frequently asked, when a slave, if I had a kind master, and I do not remember ever to have given a negative answer” (28). As the passage draws to a close, Douglass explains that this type of punishment, the possibility of alienation from the vestiges of family they are allowed, causes enslaved people to “suppress the truth rather than take the consequences of telling it,” adding that “in doing so” they “prove themselves a part of the human family” (27). Douglass’ evocation of the idea of the “human family,” an idea that encompasses enslaved and enslaver, black and white, and male and female alike, foreshadows his treatment of the “family” as an inclusive term that is disrupted by the extreme act of domestic violence that enslavers perpetrate on their captive family members in *My Bondage and My Freedom*; however, before moving on to our discussion of Douglass’ subversion of antebellum domestic ideology in his second autobiography, it is well to consider a final example of his ironic use of “family,” a word that generally denotes inclusion, as a term that illustrates the utter alienation of the enslaved in his first.

Two of the instances when Douglass describes himself as “in the family” of his former enslavers bookend a passage in the 1845 *Narrative* that offers its clearest illustration of the alienation and degradation that the Antebellum Era’s deeply flawed domestic ideology visits on the lives of enslaved people. After Douglass had “lived in Master Hugh’s family about seven years,” Aaron Anthony dies, and he is returned to the Eastern Shore for the valuation and division of his property. By the time he announces:

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Hammond concludes this idyllic picture of Southern slavery by asserting that ‘our slaves’ are ‘satisfied with their lot, happy in their comforts, and devoted to their masters’ (pp. 36-37)” (124-125).

“Thanks to a kind Providence, I fell to the portion of Mrs. Lucretia, and was sent immediately back to Baltimore to live again in the family of Master Hugh” (47), Douglass’ readers are well-aware that, for enslaved people, to be “in the family” means to be forever bound to it as chattel.

Douglass’ account of the valuation and division of Aaron Anthony’s property in the 1845 *Narrative* describes two different events—the valuation and, then the division—that, together, characterize the plantation “family” as a set of social relations based on marriage and biological kinship that are only truly beneficial for enslavers in that they serve as the basis for the transfer of their property, including the enslaved, from one generation to the next. His youngest son, Richard, having died some years earlier, when Aaron Anthony dies leaving “no will as to the disposal of his property,” Douglass explains that it “was therefore necessary to have a valuation of the property, that it might be equally divided between Mrs. Lucretia and Master Andrew” (45), his only living children and, therefore, legal heirs. For the enslaved people—who have “families at a distance” (66) if they have them at all—the valuation and division of property is a humiliating experience fraught with an overwhelming sense of helplessness and desperation. Describing, first, the valuation, Douglass notes that “Men and women, old and young, married and single, were ranked with horses, sheep, and swine. There were horses and men, cattle and women, pigs and children, all holding the same rank in the scale of being, and all were subjected to the same narrow examination” (46). Here, Douglass emphasizes the “brute” status of the enslaved people being *valuated* alongside the Anthony family’s livestock, underscoring their fungibility when he adds that “Silvery-headed age and sprightly youth, maids and matrons, had to undergo the same

inspection” (46). Douglass returns to the theme of brutishness to stress the feelings of humiliation and helplessness that characterize the enslaved peoples’ experience at the valuation, concluding, “At this moment, I saw more clearly than ever the brutalizing effects of slavery upon both slave and slaveholder” (46), once again calling attention to chattel slavery’s degradation of the enslavers, a rhetorical gesture typical of Garrisonian anti-slavery discourse that he will leave out of his account of the episode in *My Bondage and My Freedom*; however, as Douglass goes on to describe the division of the Anthony family’s property, there is an unmistakable shift in his discourse, giving rise to one of the most effectual expressions of enslaved people’s experience as chattel in the 1845 *Narrative*.

While the valuation of property is a humiliating, or brutalizing, experience, the division is terrifying. Douglass writes, “I have no language to express the high excitement and deep anxiety which were felt among us poor slaves during this time. Our fate for life was now to be decided. We had no more voice in that decision than the brutes among which we were ranked” (46), returning a final time to the theme of brutishness that dominates his portrayal of the valuation. The enslaved people’s anxiety proceeds from two specific types of contingencies that emerge from the division of property, the “pain of separation” (46) and the fear of falling under the control of a cruel enslaver, both of which the enslaved are helpless to prevent. As Douglass explains, “A single word from the white men was enough—against all our wishes, prayers, and entreaties—to sunder forever the dearest friends, dearest kindred, and strongest ties known to human beings” (46). Here, one can only marvel at Douglass’ succinct expression of how antebellum domestic ideology, supported by its convoluted and tragically malleable juridical



instruments of private property and *legal* inheritance, strips an entire class of “human beings” of all vestiges of sovereignty, robbing enslaved people not only of voice, agency, and self-determination, but also of community, kinship, and humanity. However, the pain of separation is secondary to “the horrid dread of falling into the hands of Master Andrew” for the Anthony family’s captives, a “most cruel wretch,” whom Douglass describes as “a common drunkard, who had by his reckless mismanagement and profligate dissipation, already wasted a large portion of his father’s *property* [emphasis mine]” because, Douglass explains, “we might as well be sold at once to Georgia traders ... for we all knew that would be our inevitable condition,—a condition held by us all in utmost horror and dread” (46). While Douglass reiterates the theme of being torn away from the tenuous but precious vestiges of community and kinship to which he and the other enslaved members of the Anthony family so desperately cling, his personal aversion to coming into Andrew Anthony’s possession portends his subversion of the Antebellum Era’s flawed domestic ideology in *My Bondage and My Freedom* when Douglass describes him as “a man who, but a few days before, to give me an example of his bloody disposition, took my little brother by the throat, threw him to the ground, and with the heel of his boot stamped upon his head till the blood gushed from his nose and ears” (46-47). Douglass believes that Andrew Anthony’s violent display is “well calculated to make me anxious of my fate,” recalling that having “committed this savage outrage upon my brother, “he turned to me and said that was the way he meant to serve me one of these days,—meaning, I suppose, when I came into his possession” (47). Keeping in mind that the three men—Douglass, Andrew Anthony, and Douglass’ little

brother—are, perhaps, the biological children of Aaron Anthony,<sup>14</sup> Douglass’ graphic depiction of Andrew Anthony’s violence against *their* younger brother forecasts the displays of extreme domestic violence within plantation families that he will use to great rhetorical effect in *My Bondage and My Freedom*.

### **All “in the Family”: The Subversion of Paternalism in *My Bondage and My Freedom***

Beginning with James M’Cune Smith’s characterization of Frederick Douglass as a *family* man who “struggled on, in New Bedford, sawing wood, rolling casks, or doing what labor he might, to support himself and young family”<sup>15</sup> in his “Introduction” to *My Bondage and My Freedom*, the focus on domestic ideology in Douglass’ re-telling of his life story becomes so pronounced that it is, oddly, quantifiable—the word “family” or “families” appearing sixty-eight times in its protracted account of Douglass’ life, eclipsing the handful of times (thirteen) that it appears in his 1845 *Narrative*. We have already noticed that Douglass calls attention to significant kinship ties—between himself and Henny, for example—that are omitted from the 1845 *Narrative*. Similarly, in several instances, Douglass simply expands the 1845 descriptions his former captors’ families to include the names, occupations, statuses, familial connections, kinship ties, and anecdotal accounts of the other enslaved people who live “in the family” with him, underscoring his emphasis on the authority of black experience in *My Bondage and My Freedom* by

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<sup>14</sup> Blight, *Frederick Douglass Prophet of Freedom*. Blight notes that “as yet we have no smoking-gun evidence that Anthony is Douglass’s natural father. Anthony had two surviving sons in 1818, Andrew and Richard, at ages twenty-one and eighteen; they are possible candidates, but with no evidence even of the hearsay variety that Douglas grew up with about the elder Anthony” (13).

<sup>15</sup> Douglass, *My Bondage and My Freedom*, 128.

accounting for a presence that is under-represented or omitted entirely from the 1845 *Narrative*. For example, describing domestic life at St. Michael's Douglass notes, "There were four slaves of us in the kitchen, and four whites in the great house—Thomas Auld, Mrs. Auld, Hadaway Auld (brother of Thomas Auld) and little Amanda. The names of the slaves in the kitchen, were Eliza, my sister; Priscilla, my aunt; Henny, my cousin; and myself. There were eight persons in the family" (246). By dividing the family according to race and calling attention to the fact that he and his biological relatives in the kitchen are enslaved, Douglass lays claim to the plantation family on behalf of his former fellow-captives, undermining its pernicious, paternalist mythos that the relationship between captives and their captors is serene, loving, and *natural*—a white-supremacist fantasy that he disrupts forcefully and often in *My Bondage and Freedom* by exposing the violent relationships that inhere within the plantation family as a result of the extreme ideological violence that is necessary to legitimate white-supremacy and perpetuate chattel slavery.

Much of Douglass' subversion of antebellum domestic ideology in *My Bondage and My Freedom* emerges from its carefully curated images of enslaved family-life in episodes that are conspicuously abridged or entirely absent from his first autobiography. In the opening chapter, for example, Douglass explains that his earliest memories "began in the family of my grandmother and grandfather. Betsey and Isaac Baily" (140). While both appear, briefly, by name in the 1845 *Narrative*, Douglass expands his description of his grandparents and life in their "little hut" with "a large family of children" (142), recalling that his grandmother, who "was held in high esteem, far higher than is the lot of most colored persons in the slave states" (141), "enjoyed the high privilege of living in a cabin, separate from the quarter, with no other burden than her own support, and the

necessary care of the little children, imposed” and “evidently esteemed it a great fortune to live so” (142).<sup>16</sup> This snapshot of black family-life calls to mind Hortense Spiller’s observation that “Whether or not we decide that the support systems that African-Americans derived under conditions of captivity should be called ‘family,’ or something else, strikes me as impertinent,” to which she adds:

We might choose to call this connectedness “family,” or “support structure,” but that is a rather different case from the moves of a dominant symbolic order, pledged to maintain the supremacy of race. It is that order that forces “family” to modify itself when it does not mean family of the “master,” or dominant enclave. It is this rhetorical and symbolic move that declares primacy over any other human and social claim, and in that political order of things, “kin,” just as gender formation, has no decisive legal or social efficacy.<sup>17</sup>

Douglass verifies Spiller’s claim in the memory of childhood in his grandparents’ family when he explains that the “practice of separating children from their mother, and hiring the latter out at distances too great to admit of their meeting, except at long intervals, is a marked feature of the cruelty and barbarity of the slave system,” adding that “it is in harmony with the grand aim of slavery, which, always and everywhere, is to reduce man

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<sup>16</sup> Andrews, *Slavery and Class in the American South: A Generation of Slave Narrative and Testimony*. Andrews explains that Betsey Baily’s “unusually high status was due mainly to her knowledge and skills and the expert proficiency with which she practiced them” (156). Andrews insightful discussion of the “social and economic hierarchies that governed the roles and responsibilities of both free whites and enslaved blacks” (152) factor heavily into my thinking about this and several other episodes that I examine later in this chapter.

<sup>17</sup> Spillers, “Mama’s Baby, Papa’s Maybe: An American Grammar Book,” 75.

to a level with the brute. It is a successful method of obliterating from the mind and heart of the slave, all just ideas of the sacredness of *the family*, as an institution.”<sup>18</sup> Intimately acquainted with the hegemony of antebellum domestic ideology—the “political order of things,” in which “‘kin,’ ... has no decisive legal or social efficacy,”<sup>19</sup> as Spillers reminds us—Douglass fashions a figure of the enslaved family in resistance to chattel slavery’s soul-crushing agenda of “obliterating from the mind and heart of the slave, all just ideas of the sacredness of *the family*, as an institution;” and, asserting his freedom, Douglass inscribes the names of his aunts, “JENNY, ESTHER, MILLY, PRISCILLA,” and his mother, “HARRIET,”<sup>20</sup> into his earliest memories in *My Bondage and My Freedom*, a profound expression of chattel slavery’s failure to enslave him.

While *My Bondage and My Freedom* well-nigh bursts with examples of chattel slavery’s deliberate exclusion of enslaved people from any meaningful participation in its domestic ideology—as Spillers accurately puts it, “the *vertical* transfer of a bloodline, of a patronymic, of titles and entitlements, of real estate and the prerogatives of ‘cold cash,’ from *fathers* to *sons* and in the supposedly free exchange of affectional ties between a male and a female of *his* choice”<sup>21</sup>—it also recognizes the utility of antebellum domestic ideology to enslavement. Looking back on his earliest experiences, Douglass invests his younger self with an early awareness of chattel slavery’s nefarious agenda to make

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<sup>18</sup> Douglass, *My Bondage and My Freedom*, 142.

<sup>19</sup> Spillers, “Mama’s Baby, Papa’s Maybe: An American Grammar Book,” 75.

<sup>20</sup> Douglass, *My Bondage and My Freedom*, 142.

<sup>21</sup> Spillers, “Mama’s Baby, Papa’s Maybe: An American Grammar Book,” 74.

“family” an empty signifier. When he is abandoned by his grandmother to live at the Great House *in* the Anthony family, Douglass recalls, “grandmamma told me to go and play with the little children. ‘They are kin to you,’ said she; ‘go and play with them.’ Among a number of cousins were Phil, Tom, Steve, and Jerry, Nance and Betty. Grandmother pointed out my brother PERRY, my sister SARAH, and my sister ELIZA, who stood in the group.”<sup>22</sup> Once again, Douglass defiantly inscribes the names of his unforgotten relatives into his story with the audacity of all capital letters, then, goes on to explain that “I really did not understand what they were to me, or I to them” before raising a series of rhetorical questions: “We were brothers and sisters, but what of that? Why should they be attached to me, or I to them?” to make the point that “Brothers and sisters we were by blood; but *slavery* had made us strangers. I heard the words brother and sisters, and knew they must mean something; but slavery had robbed these terms of their true meaning” (149), and we are reminded, yet again, of Spiller’s assertion that in chattel slavery’s white-supremacist “political order of things, ‘kin’ ... has no decisive legal or social efficacy.”<sup>23</sup> Still, even though Douglass is aware that family ties among the enslaved are tenuous arrangements—having already demonstrated with great efficacy in the 1845 *Narrative*, and, here, early in *My Bondage and My Freedom* how effortlessly they are sundered by enslavers for punishment or profit—as he plans his self-liberation from the Hugh Auld family in Baltimore, he emphasizes the power of antebellum domestic ideology to keep captives *bound* to the plantation. “It is my opinion,” Douglass

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<sup>22</sup> Douglass, *My Bondage and My Freedom*, 149.

<sup>23</sup> Spillers, “Mama’s Baby, Papa’s Maybe: An American Grammar Book,” 75.

asserts, “that thousands would escape from slavery who now remain there, but for the strong cords of affection that bind them to their families, relatives and friends. The daughter is hindered from escaping, by the love she bears her mother, and the father, by the love he bears his children.”<sup>24</sup> In Douglass case—despite the *good fortune* of spending his early years in his grandparents’ family and of maintaining relationships with extended family members throughout much of his time in captivity—he recalls, “I had no relations in Baltimore, and I saw no probability of ever living in the neighborhood of sisters and brothers,” explaining that “the thought of leaving my friends, was among the strongest obstacles to my running away” (346-347). Whether dividing the enslaved members of plantation families from their free, white relatives to maintain chattel slavery’s white-supremacist *status quo* or exploiting the bonds “that the captive person developed, time and again, certain ethical and sentimental features that tied her and him. *across* the landscape to others,”<sup>25</sup> which Spillers defines with such poetic force, antebellum domestic ideology imbricates the enslaved person in world of alienation and estrangement, a cruel and kinless disruption of the self, reinforced by the ever-present threat of ideological violence.

**A House (Valuated) and Divided: Yes. The Commodity Does, in Fact, Speak**

Douglass’ account of the valuation and division of the Anthony family’s *property* in *My Bondage and My Freedom* demonstrates that the primary function of antebellum domestic ideology is to ensure the uninterrupted transfer of the enslaved as property from

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<sup>24</sup> Douglass, *My Bondage and My Freedom*, 346.

<sup>25</sup> Spillers, “Mama’s Baby, Papa’s Maybe: An American Grammar Book,” 75.

one generation of white men to the next through its complex juridical instruments governing property and inheritance. In the opening lines of the passage, Douglass explains that the valuation and division of property “had a share in deepening my horror of slavery, and increasing my hostility toward those men and measures that practically uphold the slave system,” reminding his readers “that though I was, after my removal from Col. Lloyd’s plantation, in form the slave of Master Hugh, I was, in *fact*, and in *law*, the slave of my old master, Capt. Anthony.”<sup>26</sup> Framing the episode with this editorial mode of discourse allows Douglass to stress the “*fact*” that the “measures that practically uphold the slavery system” emerge from the imbrication of antebellum domestic ideology with “*law*,” the authoritative civil code that mandates the property status of enslaved people, superseding even private arrangements between their enslavers. Douglass goes on to describe the experience as a foretaste of “that painful uncertainty which slavery brings to the ordinary lot of mortals,” observing that “Sickness, adversity and death may interfere with the plans and purposes of all; but the slave has the added danger of changing homes, changing hands, and of having separations unknown to other men” (237), emphasizing its devastating impact on enslaved people rather than its “brutalizing effects”<sup>27</sup> on their captors. However, as the passage unfolds, Douglass continues to foreground his personal experience, carefully elaborating his account to reflect the emotional toll of its uncertain outcome on his *family*, the Hugh Auld family, recalling that it “was a sad day for me, a sad day for little Tommy, and a sad day for my dear Baltimore

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<sup>26</sup> Douglass, *My Bondage and My Freedom*, 236.

<sup>27</sup> Douglass, *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass*, 46.



mistress and teacher, when I left for the Eastern Shore, to be valued and divided. We, all three, wept bitterly that day; for we might be parting, and we feared we were parting, forever. No one could tell among which pile of chattels I should be flung.”<sup>28</sup> The image that Douglass evokes—the tears of little Tommy and Sophia Auld falling in concert with his own—is not a typical phantasm of white people’s suffering, like those carefully crafted to illustrate “the brutalizing effects of slavery on both slave and slaveholder”<sup>29</sup> in the 1845 *Narrative*; rather, it is the image of a plantation *family* disrupted by the uncertainty that arises from the property status of its enslaved family member, epitomizing Douglass’ clever and effective subversion of paternalism in *My Bondage and My Freedom*, a text that expresses its alienation and estrangement of enslaved people in complex and compelling ways.

Reminiscent of his 1845 account, Douglass’ revision of the valuation and division of the Anthony family’s property in *My Bondage and My Freedom* recognizes its “brutal” degradation of its enslaved family members by registering their humiliation at being valued alongside the family’s livestock. Describing the “intensified degradation of the spectacle” at the valuation, Douglass exclaims, “What an assemblage! Men and women, young and old, married and single; moral and intellectual beings, in open contempt of their humanity, level at a blow with horses, sheep, horned cattle and swine! Horses and men—cattle and women—pigs and children—all holding the same rank in the scale of social existence.”<sup>30</sup> It is important to notice that while the enslaved people are, certainly,

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<sup>28</sup> Douglass, *My Bondage and My Freedom*, 237.

<sup>29</sup> Douglass, *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass*, 46.

<sup>30</sup> Douglass, *My Bondage and My Freedom*, 237.

robbed of their humanity, they are, yet, recognized as living beings among other living beings. Chattel slavery's ultimate degradation emerges from the commodification of the enslaved, who, standing among the livestock, are "all subjected to the same narrow inspection, to ascertain their value in gold and silver—the only standard of worth applied by slaveholders to slaves!" (237). No longer human, nor animal in the eyes of their enslavers, at valuation of property in *My Bondage and My Freedom* the enslaved people are commodified, exchangeable, fungible. Fred Moten's pushback against Karl Marx's critique of "value" in *Capital* is compelling, here. Resisting what he describes as Marx's assertion that "the speaking commodity is an impossibility invoked only to mitigate against mystifying notions of the commodity's essential value," Moten explains that his own "argument starts with the historical reality of commodities who spoke—of laborers who were commodities before, as it were, the abstraction of labor power from their bodies and continue to pass on this material heritage across the divide that separates slavery from 'freedom.'" <sup>31</sup> While Douglass' account of the valuation and division of property certainly expresses the profound sense of alienation arising from their commodification, the passage avoids the problematic "dual ventriloquizations" that Moten identifies in Marx's imaginary figure of the commodity that/who, if it could speak, "discovers herself, comes to know herself, only as a function of being exchanged, having been embedded in a mode of sociality that is shaped by exchange" (9). According to

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<sup>31</sup> Fred Moten, *In the Break: The Aesthetics of the Black Radical Tradition*, NED-New Edition., (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2003), 5-6, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/10.5749/j.ctts6jtk>.

Moten: “what is sounded through Douglass is a theory of value—an objective and objectional, productive and reproductive ontology—whose primitive axiom is that commodities speak” (11). And, not only does Douglass speak, he offers his own (e)valuation of the scene: “How vividly, at that moment, did the brutalizing power of slavery flash before me! Personality swallowed up in the sordid idea of property! Manhood lost in chattelhood!”<sup>32</sup> a rhetorical performance of reason that undermines chattel slavery’s subjugation of humanity to forces of its market for human flesh, a literary act of resistance that exploits the Anthony family’s commodification of its enslaved members to disrupt the Antebellum Era’s paternalistic fantasy of the plantation family.

### **Nearly-White Privilege: Inescapable Violence and a Failed Plantation Father**

Throughout *My Bondage and My Freedom*, Douglass portrays the plantation scene as the province of a family disrupted by chattel slavery’s extreme ideological violence, violence that is necessary, as we have shown, to establish white supremacy, the cornerstone of the enslavers’ *right* to subjugate their black family members and *to enjoy* them as *property*. Saidiya V. Hartman notes that from “the vantage point of the everyday relations of slavery, enjoyment, broadly speaking, defined the parameters of racial relations, since in practice all whites were allowed a great deal of latitude in regard to uses of the enslaved.”<sup>33</sup> Hartman goes on to add that since “the subjection of the slave to all whites defined his condition in civil society, effectively this made the enslaved an object of property to be potentially used and abused by all whites” (24). Two passages

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<sup>32</sup> Douglass, *My Bondage and My Freedom*, 237.

<sup>33</sup> Hartman, *Scenes of Subjection*, 23.

from *My Bondage and Freedom*, which do not appear in the 1845 *Narrative*, offer thought-provoking examples of the continual threat of violence that enslaved people endure while navigating the white-supremacist landscape of daily life in the antebellum South. Both examples involve highly-valued and much-favored enslaved members of Colonel Lloyd's plantation family. In the first instance, Douglass recalls "the whipping of a woman belonging to Colonel Lloyd, named Nelly" by a "wretched" overseer, Mr. Sevier. According to Douglass, the "offense alleged against Nelly, was one of the commonest and most indefinite in the whole catalogue of offenses usually laid to the charge of slaves, viz: 'impudence,'" an offense that "may mean almost anything, or nothing at all, just according to the caprice of the master or overseer, at the moment."<sup>34</sup> While Douglass seems to suggest that impudence is a charge that sadistic overseers often use to justify unnecessary violence, in Nelly's case, he concedes, "I can easily believe that, according to all slaveholding standards, here was a genuine instance of impudence," adding that in "Nelly there were all the necessary conditions for committing the offense. She was a bright mulatto, the recognized wife of a favorite 'hand' on board Col. Lloyd's sloop, and the mother of five sprightly children. She was a vigorous and spirited woman, and one of the most likely, on the plantation, to be guilty of impudence" (180). The elements of Nelly's description that cause Douglass to presuppose her guilt invite closer examination. Describing her as a "bright mulatto," Douglass indicates that, like himself, she is the child of a white man and an enslaved woman, and as William Andrews explains, "Light skin was a preferred complexion for house servants according to the

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<sup>34</sup> Douglass, *My Bondage and My Freedom*, 180.

many masters and mistresses who assumed that some degree of white lineage endowed a mixed-race slave with the ‘mental superiority’ needed to perform tasks in the big house.”<sup>35</sup> However, as Douglass goes on to describe Nelly’s violent resistance to Sevier’s brutality, he contends that there “is no doubt that Nelly felt herself superior, in some respects, to the slaves around her. She was a wife and a mother; her husband was a valued and favorite slave,” adding that her husband “was one of the first hands on board of the sloop, and the sloop hands—since they had to represent the plantation abroad—were generally treated tenderly. The overseer never was allowed to whip Harry; why then should he be allowed to whip Harry’s wife?”<sup>36</sup> Rather than attributing Nelly’s fighting spirit to her proximity whiteness, Douglass attributes it to the privileged status that she enjoys as the wife of one of Colonel Lloyd’s most-favored captives. One wonders whether Douglass presupposes the accuracy of Sevier’s accusation—qualified as it is by his commentary on chattel slavery’s low bar for impudence—because he resents her sense of her own superiority. As William Andrews points out, the “status, privileges, and rewards provided by slaveholders for certain kinds of work could set slaves at odds with each other ... Resentment, envy, or scorn could easily lead to tension, if not conflict, between favored slaves and those to whom favors were rarely offered or who refused to solicit them.”<sup>37</sup> While this may or may not be the case, here, Douglass recalls that Nelly “nobly resisted, and, unlike most of the slaves, seemed determined to make her whipping

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<sup>35</sup> Andrews, *Slavery and Class in the American South*, 102.

<sup>36</sup> Douglass, *My Bondage and My Freedom*, 181.

<sup>37</sup> Andrews, *Slavery and Class in the American South*, 67.

cost Mr. Sevier as much as possible,”<sup>38</sup> suggesting that he admires Nelly’s actions despite any disdain for her attitude. Ultimately, Douglass characterizes Nelly’s violent resistance to Sevier’s dominance as an act of violent self-assertion on par with his own resistance to Edward Covey, noting that “She was whipped—severely whipped; but she was not subdued . . . He had bruised her flesh, but had left her invincible spirit undaunted” (182). For Douglass, the episode illustrates the efficacy of violent self-assertion as a form of individual resistance to chattel slavery:

Such floggings are seldom repeated by the same overseer. They prefer to whip those who are most easily whipped. The old doctrine that submission is the very best cure for outrage and wrong, does not hold good on the slave plantation. He is whipped oftenest, who is whipped easiest; and that slave who has the courage to stand up for himself against the overseer, although he may have many hard stripes at the first, becomes, in the end, a freeman, even though he sustain the formal relation of a slave. (182)

Nonetheless, Douglass’ account of the altercation between Nelly—a privileged, much-favored captive of Colonel Lloyd, an enslaver of immense wealth and power—and Sevier—a “wretched” overseer to whom it is beneath Lloyd to speak—reveals the degree to which the enslaved—owing to chattels slavery’s insatiable demand for white-supremacist violence—are, indeed, the property of *all* whites as Hartman observes. In this way, Douglass’ account of Nelly’s “whipping” undermines paternalist fantasies of

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<sup>38</sup> Douglass, *My Bondage and My Freedom*, 181.

the master/father who protects and cares for the captives under his strict but loving charge.

For enslaved people, the domestic violence inherent within the plantation family is inescapable, regardless of whatever privilege or elevated status their relationship with their enslaver affords them, even those to whom the enslaver feels a profound sense of attachment and sentiment. Such is the case with one of Colonel Lloyd's coachmen, William Wilks, a man "whispered, and pretty generally admitted as a fact" to be "a son of Col. Lloyd, by a highly favored slave-woman, who was still on the plantation" (195). Observing that Wilks "was often called by his surname ... by white and colored people on the home plantation," indicating that he enjoys an unusually high level of respect for an enslaved person, Douglass describes him as "a very fine looking man," who "was about as white as anybody on the plantation," adding that "in manliness of form, and comeliness of features, he bore a very striking resemblance to Mr. Murray Lloyd" (195). As with many of Douglass' descriptions of enslaved people who, in some way, subvert the ideological pillars of chattel slavery, he fashions an image of Wilks that emphasizes his *near* whiteness and *good* looks; however, his account of Wilks—while it certainly undermines essentialist notions of white supremacy—focuses on the deep, unreconcilable fissures that chattel slavery's endemic violence creates within the tenuous hierarchies of property and inheritance that the Antebellum Era's paternalist domestic ideology legitimates. Douglass explains that there "were many reasons for believing" the "whisper" that Colonel Lloyd is Wilks' father, "not only in William's appearance, but in the undeniable freedom which he enjoyed over all others, and his apparent consciousness of being something more than a slave to his master" (195). Consequently, Douglass adds

that it “was notorious, too, that William had a deadly enemy in Murray Lloyd, whom he so much resembled, and that the latter greatly worried his father with importunities to sell William” (195). Given the severe strictures of *partus sequiter ventrem*, a *de facto* practice encoded into Virginian colonial law nearly two centuries before Douglass is writing,<sup>39</sup> William Wilks remarkable fraternal resemblance to Murray Lloyd poses no conceivable threat to his *legitimate*, white brother’s legal status as Colonel Lloyd’s heir. As Wilks’ condition must, by law, follow that of his “highly-favored” but still-enslaved mother, Murray Lloyd has no reason to imagine that their father would manumit his favorite son, much less bequeath the whole farm to him.<sup>40</sup> Rather, theirs is a sibling rivalry over their father’s affection, one in which the dashing and much-beloved Wilks seems to have the upper-hand. Eventually Murray Lloyd convinces his father to sell his brother, but only after Colonel Lloyd exhausts all practical measures at his disposal to mitigate the conflict between his two sons. Douglass reports that “Mr. L. tried what giving William a whipping would do, toward making things smooth; but this was a failure. It was a compromise, and defeated itself; for, immediately after the infliction, the heart-sickened colonel atoned to William for the abuse, by giving him a gold watch and chain,”<sup>41</sup> an act

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<sup>39</sup> Jennifer L. Morgan, “*Partus sequiter ventrem*: Law, Race, and Reproduction in Colonial Slavery,” *Small Axe: A Caribbean Journal of Criticism* 22, no. 1 (2018): 1-17, <https://doi-org.argo.library.okstate.edu/10.1215/07990537-4378888>. Morgan’s arresting history of the intersection of reproduction, enslavement, and law that gave rise to the colonial “slave” codes is a fascinating and informative read.

<sup>40</sup> Spillers, “Mama’s Baby, Papa’s Maybe: An American Grammar Book.” Spillers explains that it “is true that the most ‘well-meaning’ of ‘masters’ (and there must have been some) could not, did not alter the ideological and hegemonic mandates of dominance” (75).

<sup>41</sup> Douglass, *My Bondage and My Freedom*, 196.



of contrition that reveals, at once, a doting father's deep sentimental attachment to his much-beloved son and an enslaver's misapprehension that a shiny bauble could redeem his captive son's affection and restore their fragile relationship, utterly shattered by chattel slavery's endemic domestic violence. Wrapping up his illustration of the enmity that chattel slavery's inescapable violence breeds between fathers, sons, and brothers, Douglass notes "that though sold to the remorseless *Woldfolk* [a notorious human-trafficker], taken in irons to Baltimore and cast into prison, with a view to being driven to the south, William, by some means—always a mystery to me—outbid all his purchasers, paid for himself, *and now resides in Baltimore, a FREEMAN,*" adding this suggestive rhetorical question, but foregoing the question mark: "Is there not room to suspect, that, as the gold watch was presented to atone for the whipping, a purse of gold was given him by the same hand, with which to effect his purchase, as an atonement for the indignity involved in selling his own flesh and blood" (196). Other than the fact that Wilks, as a Freeman, remained close to the Eastern Shore and his father in the slave-city of Baltimore, Douglass offers no indication as to whether Colonel Lloyd's gold is enough to redeem his beloved son's affection and atone for what Douglass describes as his "indignity," or assuage what must have been his own guilt. However, the empirical value of Lloyd's monetary *reparations* for his son's enslavement, implicit in the image of Wilks living in Baltimore as a Freeman—regardless of the degree to which the poor white people of the Eastern Shore (or anywhere for that matter, then or now) may have resented him for his unique, privileged status—should not, cannot, and absolutely will not go unmentioned, here.

Wrapping up the passage, Douglass reiterates its rebuttal of essentialist notions of white supremacy that emanate from Wilks' near whiteness, asserting that "the circumstances of William, on the great house farm, show him to have occupied a different position from the other slaves, and, certainly, there is nothing in the supposed hostility of slaveholders to amalgamation, to forbid the supposition that William Wilks was the son of Edward Lloyd," adding that "*Practical* amalgamation is common in every neighborhood where I have been, in slavery" (196) to suggest that, often, the enslaver's *enjoyment* of his property gives rise to people who, like Wilks and Douglass himself, undermine the very ideological pillars of white supremacy that mandate their status as property. Or, as Douglass puts it in his reflections on his own parentage in the 1845 *Narrative*, "a very different-looking class of people are springing up at the south, and are now held in slavery, from those originally brought to this country from Africa; and if their increase do no other good, it will do away the force of the argument, that God cursed Ham, and therefore American slavery is right."<sup>42</sup> Even so, Colonel Lloyd's failure to manage the conflict between his sons and to restore the *peaceful* patriarchal order of The Great House Farm undermines the paternalistic myth of the plantation family by exposing how, in its ubiquity, chattel slavery's ideological violence dominates all inter-racial relations in the antebellum South, rendering even the most powerful enslavers powerless to intercede on behalf of even their most-beloved enslaved *children*. However,

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<sup>42</sup> Douglass, *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass*, 17. In "Dark-faced Europeans': The Nineteenth-Century Colonial Travelogue and the Invention of the Hima Race," Gatsinzi Basaninyenzi traces how the Curse of Ham—a bible passage exploited by white supremacists in the Nineteenth Century as an authoritative historical model for race and ethnicity, as Douglass commentary suggests—gives rise to the horrific genocide of the Rwandan Civil War in the last decade of the Twentieth Century.

no other passage in *My Bondage and My Freedom* (or anywhere else in Douglass vast opus) registers the traumatic impact of chattels slavery's domestic violence to the degree that Douglass' account of the much-discussed beating that his Aunt Esther (Aunt Hester in the 1845 *Narrative*) suffers at the hands of the patriarch of his own plantation family, Aaron Anthony, again, the man "sometimes whispered" to be Douglass' biological father.<sup>43</sup>

### **Voice Vs. Violence: Aunt Esther and the Shattering of Paternalism**

Whether or not Aaron Anthony is, in fact, Frederick Douglass' biological father has little bearing on his role in Douglass' effective subversion of antebellum domestic ideology in *My Bondage and My Freedom*. Douglass opens the chapter that culminates in its graphic re-telling of the first night that he awakens to the "most terrible spectacle"<sup>44</sup> of Aaron Anthony beating his Aunt Esther with a conspicuously sympathetic characterization of Anthony that portrays him as a man who could be either "remarkably mild and gentle" or "when it suited him, appear to be literally insensible to the claims of humanity, when appealed to by the helpless against an aggressor, and he could himself commit outrages, deep, dark and nameless."<sup>45</sup> According to Douglass, Anthony "was not by nature worse than other men," contending that if he had "been brought up in a free state, surrounded by the just restraints of free society ... Capt. Anthony might have been as humane a man, and every way as respectable, as many who now oppose the slave

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<sup>43</sup> Douglass, *My Bondage and My Freedom*, 151.

<sup>44</sup> Douglass, *Narrative of The Life of Frederick Douglass*, 18.

<sup>45</sup> Douglass, *My Bondage and My Freedom*, 171.

system” (171). To this ironic comparison of his former enslaver to his former anti-slavery allies, Douglass appends a conventional Anglo-centric, Garrisonian anti-slavery axiom: “The slaveholder, as well as the slave, is the victim of the slave system” (171), putting a rhetorical exclamation point on his implicit indictment of the white supremacy latent in their perspective on chattel slavery. However, shaking off the bonds of conventional anti-slavery discourse to offer a characterization of Anthony that is heavily informed by the authority of his own experience with his former enslaver’s erratic behavior, Douglass notes, “Could the reader have seen him gently leading me by the hand—as he sometimes did—patting me on the head, speaking to me in soft, caressing tones and calling me his “little Indian boy,” he would have deemed him a kind old man, and really, almost fatherly” (172).<sup>46</sup> However, as Douglass explains, “the pleasant moods of a slaveholder are remarkably brittle; they are easily snapped; they neither come often, nor remain long” (172), going on to figure Anthony as a perpetually tormented man, whose mental state would likely be considered pathological, according to the conventions of contemporary psychological discourse. Douglass recalls: “He seldom walked alone without muttering to himself; and he occasionally stormed about, as if defying an army of invisible foes. “He would do this, that, and the other; he’d be d—d if he did not,”—was the usual form of his

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<sup>46</sup> Fatima Zahra Mansour Boukhtache, “U.S. Cultural Hegemony and the Shifting Positionality of Frederick Douglass,” *American Nineteenth Century History* 22, no. 2 (2021): 177-195, <https://doi-org.argo.library.okstate.edu/10.1080/14664658.2021.1967565>. The white-supremacist conflation of Douglass’ racial ambiguity with the Anglo-American fantasy of the Native American calls attention to Douglass’ opposition to Westward Expansion, articulated in “The Slavery Party,” a speech appended to *My Bondage and My Freedom* as well as at various times throughout his long career. Boukhtache’s essay offers a great deal of insight into this facet of Douglass’ political thought around the time that he is writing *Life and Times* as well as addressing the shift in his positionality later in life.

threats” (172). As the passage unfolds toward its climax, the beating of Aunt Hester, Douglass’s characterization of Anthony begins to resemble less and less the portrait of a man who has been corrupted by the evils of chattel slavery; rather, it becomes an illustration of a troubled man, whose inability to overcome his own *passions* renders him utterly incapable of performing the fatherly role incumbent upon enslavers in the Antebellum Era’s paternalistic fantasy of plantation life.

While Douglass’s much-elaborated account of Aunt Esther’s beating in *My Bondage and My Freedom* gains the additional rhetorical force of being committed by the plantation family’s father figure, it also demonstrates many of the discursive characteristics that we have come to recognize as hallmarks of Douglass’s second autobiography. To begin with, Douglass stages the dreadful scene as a consequence of Anthony’s unchecked passions, recalling that “I have seen him in a tempest of passion . . . a passion into which entered all the bitter ingredients of pride, hatred, envy, jealousy, and the thirst for revenge” (175). Then, Douglass immediately emphasizes the fact that his own experience reflects the experiences of millions of other enslaved people: “The circumstances which I am about to narrate, and which gave rise to this fearful tempest of passion, are not singular nor isolated in slave life, but are common in every slaveholding community in which I have lived. They are incidental to the relation of master and slave, and exist in all sections of slave-holding countries” (175), giving voice to voiceless multitude. Throughout his narration of the events, Douglass prioritizes his Aunt Hester’s experience over Anthony’s in ways that speak to the experience of enslaved women everywhere. For example, he describes her as “a young woman who possessed that which is ever a curse to the slave-girl; namely—personal beauty,” adding that she “was tall, well

formed, and made a fine appearance. The daughters of Col. Lloyd could scarcely surpass her in personal charms” (175). Here, the juxtaposition of *good* looks with whiteness reflects the same rhetorical move that we have observed in Douglass’ accounts of William Wilks and Nelly Kellem,<sup>47</sup> a detail that causes William Andrew to observe that “Esther’s beauty in Anthony’s eyes appears to have been a major factor in his giving her a relatively advantageous position in his ... ‘kitchen family,’” adding that “combined evidence from both of Douglass’s antebellum autobiographies suggests that Anthony awarded Esther her position to establish a quid-pro-quo relationship with her, one in which Esther’s relatively privileged membership in her enslaver’s kitchen family entitled him to her gratitude, loyalty, and personal attentiveness to his desires” (154). Again, Douglass points out that the privilege that comes at such a high price to his Aunt Esther is typical of the experiences of enslaved women, explaining:

It is one of the damning characteristics of the slave system, that it robs its victims of every earthly incentive to a holy life. The fear of God, and the hope of heaven, are found sufficient to sustain many slave-women, amidst the snares and dangers of their strange lot; but, this side of God and heaven, a slave-woman is at the mercy of the power, caprice and passion of her owner. Slavery provides no means for the honorable continuance of the race. Marriage—as imposing obligations on the parties to it—has no existence here, except in such hearts as are purer and higher than the standard morality around them. (176)

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<sup>47</sup> Andrews, *Slavery and Class in the American South*, 243. Andrews gives a name to the nameless, here.

Further, the details of the beating speak to the commonality of the experience among enslaved women and the interchangeability of enslavers in the throes of enjoying their *property*. Douglass, who “was probably awakened by the shrieks and piteous cries of poor Esther ... could distinctly see and hear what was going on, without being seen by old master” (176), recalls the horror of the moment:

Esther’s wrists were firmly tied, and the twisted rope was fastened to a strong staple in a heavy wooden joist above, near the fireplace. Here she stood, on a bench, her arms tightly drawn over her breast. Her back and shoulders were bare to the waist. Behind her stood old master, with cowskin in hand, preparing his barbarous work with all manner of harsh, coarse, and tantalizing epithets. The screams of his victim were most piercing. He was cruelly deliberate, and protracted the torture, as one who was delighted with the scene. Again and again he drew the hateful whip through his hand, adjusting it with a view of dealing the most pain-giving blow. (176-177).

Several of the details, here, are reminiscent of the two other similar episodes that we have already examined: Weeden and his engagement with Ceal’s “raw back” (69) and Thomas Auld’s sadistic fascination with “causing the warm blood to drip” from Henny’s “naked shoulders” (53). However, Douglass’ account of his Aunt Esther’s beating becomes significantly different from these episodes as well as from his 1845 account of it when Douglass notes, “Poor Esther had never yet been severely whipped, and her shoulders were plump and tender. Each blow, vigorously laid on, brought screams as well as blood. ‘*Have mercy; Oh! have mercy*’ she cried; ‘*I won’t do so no more;*’ but her piercing cries

seemed only to increase his fury. His answers to them are too coarse and blasphemous to be produced here” (177). Douglass literally gives voice to a family member rendered voiceless in the contraction of his story to Garrison’s Anglo-centric conventions of anti-slavery discourse, here, withholding speech from the father-figure of the plantation family while exposing the extreme domestic violence inherent in every conceivable relationship between captive and captor within the plantation family, glossed by the ubiquitous and pernicious paternalism of antebellum domestic ideology. In this, Douglass’ re-memory of the unspeakably traumatic experience that he describes in the 1845 *Narrative* as the “blood-stained gate” and “the entrance to the hell of slavery”<sup>48</sup> becomes, perhaps, the most forceful expression of his self-liberation in *My Bondage and My Freedom*.

So far, much of our discussion has focused on Frederick Douglass’ antebellum texts and anti-slavery activism. In the next, brief chapter we begin to register how the violence of chattel slavery transforms into the extra-legal but institutional violence of the Reconstruction Era. Through close readings of the “Letter to His Old Master” that is appended to *My Bondage and My Freedom* and Douglass’ account of his triumphant return to the Eastern Shore and “deathbed” visit with Thomas Auld in *Life and Times*, we conclude that Douglass uses his pen and his voice to ensnare his former captor in a narrative of redemption, the ultimate form of retribution.

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<sup>48</sup> Douglass, *Narrative of The Life of Frederick Douglass*, 18.



## CHAPTER V

### READING REDEMPTION AS RETRIBUTION IN *LIFE AND TIMES OF FREDERICK DOUGLASS: A POST-FACE*

In “Letter to His Old Master,” an open letter to Thomas Auld, written on the tenth anniversary of Frederick Douglass’ self-emancipation and appended to *My Bondage and My Freedom* several years later,<sup>1</sup> the former fugitive turned world-famous author, editor, and public-speaker accosts his former captor with a ferocity apropos to the profound revulsion to chattel slavery emerging on both the national and international scenes, practically in lock-step with the escalating militancy of his own public persona. “At this moment,” Douglass writes, “you are probably the guilty holder of at least three of my own dear sisters, and my only brother, in bondage. These you regard as your property. They are recorded on your ledger, or perhaps have been sold to human flesh-mongers, with a view to filling our own ever-hungry purse,”<sup>2</sup> calling attention to the shameless and base proto-capitalist greed driving chattel slavery’s insatiable market for human flesh. Douglass, motivated by the “desire to know how and where these dear sisters are,”

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<sup>1</sup> Blight, *Frederick Douglass Prophet of Freedom*, 198.

<sup>2</sup> Douglass, *My Bondage and My Freedom*, 417.

assaults the man whose wretchedness he has so famously brought to light with a series of questions about his *lost* family: “Have you sold them? or are they still in your possession? What has become of them? are they living or dead? And my dear old grandmother, whom you turned out like an old horse to die in the woods—is she still alive?” (417). Demanding, at the very least, information about his sisters and urging the unlikely return of his grandmother, Douglass implores the remorseless human-trafficker, “let me know all about them. If my grandmother be still alive ... send her to me at Rochester, or bring her to Philadelphia,” vehemently exclaiming, “Send me my grandmother! that I may watch over and take care of her in her old age. And my sisters—let me know all about them” (417). But Douglass doesn’t stop there. Upbraiding Auld for having “kept them in utter ignorance, and ... therefore robbed them of the sweet enjoyments of writing or receiving letters from absent friends and relatives,” a general practice of enslavement, Douglass evokes the retributive justice of divine violence, warning Auld with the prophetic urgency, “Your wickedness and cruelty, committed in this respect on your fellow-creatures, are greater than all the stripes you have laid upon my back or theirs. It is an outrage upon the soul, a war upon the immortal spirit, and one for which you must give account at the bar of our common Father and Creator” (417). David Blight has observed that this “letter to Auld was a public humiliation, a symbolic indictment of all the thousands of white slaveholding ‘fathers’ through the years,”<sup>1</sup> However, though part and parcel of his aggressive subversion of antebellum domestic ideology in *My Bondage and My Freedom*, Douglass’ 1848 letter to Thomas Auld is an

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<sup>1</sup> Blight, *Frederick Douglass Prophet of Freedom*, 199.

exercise in futility with regard to any realistic hope of recovering his grandmother and siblings, the hegemony of the plantation family—secured by the violent social, cultural, and material realities of chattel slavery—proscribing his expressed desire to do so.

Eventually, large-scale violence does come, in the form of the American Civil War, finally bringing an end to the Antebellum Era plantation family. It does not, however, bring an end to its white-supremacist violence. Perhaps, Walter Benjamin's reflections in "Critique of Violence," the essay that underpins our first chapter's discussion of Frederick Douglass' formative experiences with ideological violence and the dominant models of subjectivity in the antebellum South, will, once again, prove helpful by offering some insight into the persistence of white-supremacist violence well beyond its "law-preserving" function as the "repressive" violence sustaining chattel-slavery during the Antebellum Era. Benjamin explains that "the function of violence in lawmaking is twofold, in the sense that lawmaking pursues as its end, with violence as the means, *what* is to be established as law, but at the moment of instatement does not dismiss violence, rather, at this very moment of lawmaking, it specifically establishes as law not an end unalloyed by violence, but one necessarily and intimately bound to it under the title of power"; thus, according to Benjamin: "Lawmaking is power making, and, to that extent, an immediate manifestation of violence."<sup>2</sup> Indeed, Frederick Douglass seems to have understood all too well the role that "power" would play in the enforcement of the "new law" laid down by the American Civil War's "law-making"

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<sup>2</sup> Walter Benjamin, "Critique of Violence," in *Reflections: Essays Aphorisms, Autobiographical Writings*, Ed. Peter Demetz, Trans. Edmund Jephcott (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1978), 295.

violence. Reflecting on the precarious political position of the Freedmen in the aftermath of the Civil War in *Life and Times*, Douglass observes that “to guard, protect, and maintain his liberty the freedman should have the ballot ... the liberties of the American people were dependent upon the ballot-box, the jury-box, and the cartridge-box ... without these no class of people could live and flourish in this country ... I set myself to work with whatever force and energy I possessed to secure this *power* [emphasis mine] for the recently-emancipated millions.”<sup>3</sup> However, to the categories of violence discussed heretofore—the “law-making” and “law-preserving” *power* of legal violence, which he comes to call “mythical violence”—Benjamin introduces the possibility that there is a third form of violence, divine violence, which he describes as “a pure immediate violence that might be able to call a halt to mythical violence” (297). Benjamin explains:

Just as in all spheres God opposes myth, mythical violence is confronted by the divine. And the latter constitutes its antithesis in all respects. If mythical violence is lawmaking, divine violence is law destroying; if the former sets boundaries, the latter boundlessly destroys them; if mythical violence brings at once guilt and retribution, divine power only expiates; if the former threatens, the latter strikes; if the former is bloody the latter is lethal without spilling blood. (297)

Indeed, the bloody violence of the American Civil War failed to expiate the “law-making” and “law-preserving” violence that served to legitimate white supremacy and perpetuate chattel slavery during the Antebellum Era, “mythical violence” that would

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<sup>3</sup> Douglass, *Life and Times of Frederick Douglass*, 816-817.

transform into the “extra-legal” but still institutional violence of the Reconstruction Era, becoming the ideological violence practiced by white Southerners and Northerners alike in the *power* struggle over what a post-chattel slavery American republic should look like.

Benjamin’s figure of divine violence calls to mind Frederick Douglass’ response to his old friend Sojourner Truth’s question, “Frederick, is God dead?,” to which the fiery, young anti-slavery activist replies, “No ... and because God is not dead slavery can only end in blood,”<sup>4</sup> as well as his menacing warning to Thomas Auld that keeping his enslaved family members in ignorance for so many years “is an outrage upon the soul, a war upon the immortal spirit, and one for which you must give account at the bar of our common Father and Creator.”<sup>5</sup> In each instance, we notice a clear desire for Divine retribution; however, in the *Life and Times*, we notice a change in his attitude. Douglass writes: “When one has advanced far in the journey of life, when he has seen and traveled over much of this great world, and has had many and strange experiences of shadows and sunshine ... It is natural that his thoughts should return to the place of his beginning, and that he should be seized by a strong desire to revisit the scenes of his early recollection, and live over in memory the incidents of his childhood” (879). This sublime passage, taken from a chapter of *Life and Times* in which Douglass, now installed in his official post as the U.S. Marshall of Washington D.C., returns to the Eastern Shore in triumph, “formerly invited by Captain Thomas Auld, then over eighty years old, to come to the

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<sup>4</sup> Douglass, *Life and Times of Frederick Douglass*, 719.

<sup>5</sup> Douglass, *My Bondage and My Freedom*, 417.

side of his dying bed” (874). Douglass patches things up with Auld; visits the Lloyd plantation where he is very well received; and as David Blight notes, “reconnected once again with his brother Perry,”<sup>6</sup> who returns to Washington with him. Douglass’ glowing account of the conquering hero’s return is clouded only by his observation that “this visit to Capt. Auld has been made the subject of mirth by heartless triflers, and by serious-minded men regretted as a weakening of my life-long testimony against slavery.”<sup>7</sup> Blight, however, contends that “Douglas went to St. Michaels to declare his equality, and in a way to practice a self-renewing forgiveness. *He* was the one dispensing the equality. With words, he was trying to bury slavery once and for all in the very soil of his birth. The entire nation’s sins were still in desperate need of remission.”<sup>8</sup> To affirm the validity of Blight’s assessment, one need only turn to the closing words of Douglass’ 1892 “Lynch Law in the South” where Douglass indicts both the North and South for the conflagration of extra-legal violence sweeping through the nation; he asserts: “The finger of scorn at the North is correlated to the dagger of the assassin at the South. The sin against the negro is both sectional and national, and until the voice of the North shall be heard in emphatic condemnation and withering reproach against these ruthless mob-law murders, it will remain equally involved with the South in this common crime.”<sup>9</sup> Yet, for Douglass, having born witness to the horrors of the Civil War only to see the extra-legal

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<sup>6</sup> Blight, *Frederick Douglass Prophet of Freedom*, 598.

<sup>7</sup> Douglass, *Life and Times of Frederick Douglass*, 876.

<sup>8</sup> Blight, 598.

<sup>9</sup> Frederick Douglass, “Lynch Law in the South,” *The North American Review* 155, no. 148 (1892): 17-24. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/25102404>.

violence legitimated by white supremacy during the Antebellum Era become the extra-legal violence, still legitimated by white supremacy, in the Reconstruction Era, the type of redemption that he portrays in the account of his return to the Eastern shore *is* a form of retribution in that it is the only way to put an end to the *power* struggle that continues when one “law” replaces another. Although Douglass announces that “Time Makes All Things Even,”<sup>10</sup> in the title of the chapter containing the episode, his final comment on the death of Thomas Auld is telling: “His death was soon after announced in the papers, and the fact that he had once owned me as a slave was cited as rendering that event noteworthy” (878), a final, bloodless moment of self-assertion that signifies Douglass’ absolute ascendancy over enslavement. In the end, it is Douglass who triumphs over Thomas Auld by using his pen and his voice to control the narrative of their lifelong struggle. As we consider questions of Douglass’ militancy in the synthesis of our own strategies of resistance to white supremacy, it is well to remember that this final figure of his former captor’s *redemption* is the ultimate form of retribution.

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<sup>10</sup> Douglass, *Life and Times of Frederick Douglass*, 874.

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