

Dismantling master thought: Discourse and race in Frederick Douglass' Narrative

Item Type	Essay
Authors	Manchester Earley, Samantha
Publisher	Centro de Publicaciones Académicas, Facultad de Artes y Ciencias, Universidad de Puerto Rico en Mayagüez
Download date	2025-05-11 07:08:55
Link to Item	https://hdl.handle.net/20.500.11801/3448

DISMANTLING MASTER THOUGHT: DISCOURSE AND RACE IN FREDERICK DOUGLASS' *NARRATIVE*

Samantha Manchester Earley

Frederick Douglass reports that, when he was a slave, he was frequently asked if he had a kind master, a query he always answered in the affirmative. In giving such answers, Douglass claims that he was not telling a lie, "for I always measured the kindness of my master by the standards of kindness set up among slaveholders around us" (*Narrative* 266). With this admission, Douglass appears, on the surface, to have absorbed the standards of the oppressor: that is, measuring kindness according to white slaveholding standards of kindness advances Douglass as a colonized "other" who parrots the master's discourse.

A closer reading of this passage, however, points to a more discerning, subversive Douglass, a Douglass who takes a master discourse and uses it to his own advantage, changing the meaning in the process. Douglass here asserts that "kindness," as well as many other terms, "slave" included, are defined by a system of "standard[s]" set up by the dominant culture, "the slaveholders around us," and that he apprehended these defining systems. His assertion that "kindness" is defined by a certain set of criteria, the slaveholders' criteria, advances the ideologically constructed nature of such definitions and opens up a space for alternative definitions and defining systems.

Hence, when Douglass claims that, although he may not have agreed with the definitions put forth in those "standard[s]" he could use them to his own advantage, he tactfully posits alternative definitions constructed by appropriating these discursive tools; that is, in borrowing the masters' definition of "kindness," Douglass almost imperceptibly changes the definition of the word. "Kindness," in an ironic troping, comes to mean its opposite. Douglass here subverts the master discourse, the master defining system, in order to advance

his point on the cruelty of slavery and to advance himself as a human subject able to manipulate complex discourses.

It is in these terms that I propose to read Frederick Douglass *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass An American Slave, Written by Himself* (1845; henceforth *Narrative*). Through his development of the character of the slave, his text subtly indicts the dominant culture's definition of "slave" or "African American" as "animal" and, by the same gesture, posits "human" as alternative. In this regard, I analyze various discourse strategies that he uses to dismantle the power structures that cripple the slave community. I will demonstrate how Douglass' narrator draws upon existing racial ideology and the discourses that define "slave," and, in the process of critiquing them, produces a new discourse that bespeaks the inevitability of difference as well as the humanity of slaves. Douglass and his narrator thus indicate that slaves must be treated as humans.

During the early 1800s, the master defining discourse was constructed around the principle that slaves and blacks are somehow "animal" and "nonhuman." The popularity of such a dehumanizing view allowed the majority of American people, slave holders and non-slave holders alike, to define themselves as "not black" or "white." Racial discourse thus was an apparatus of power, a strategy for the reinforcement of an "ethno-centric" attitude. As Homi Bhabha says, the objective of racial discourse is

to construe the colonized as a population of degenerate types on the basis of racial origin, in order to justify conquest and to establish systems of administration and instruction. ("Signs" 154)

The construction of the dominant American racial discourse is thus a complex articulation of religious rationales and economic stratagems used to construe Africans and African Americans as "a population of degenerate types" in need of slavery—a "system of administration and instruction." This dominant racial discourse finally produces a system of representation that translates into subjugation and racial discord and distrust. Frederick Douglass the slave and Frederick Douglass the fugitive slave narrator ingeniously subvert these discourses that equate "slave" with "animal," and, in their exposure and denunciation of this and other dehumanizing appellations, Douglass' two notions of "slave" establish the humanity of "slaves" and, by extension, African Americans.

A more particular representation of the use of religious discourse as a method to justify slavery is Captain Auld's religious experience at a Methodist camp meeting. Douglass' comment on this particular

event points directly to the nefarious ideological purposes that religion might be made to serve:

I indulged a faint hope that his [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. I was disappointed in both these respects. It neither made him to be humane to his slaves, nor to emancipate them. If it had any effect on his character, it made him more cruel and hateful in all his ways. (287)

Auld's "conversion" to Christianity evidently introduced him to an entirely new system of justification for his treatment of his slaves. After his conversion, then, he could beat his slaves with impunity, for Auld would have learned in church that they, having been cursed by God, were made to be punished. Auld's torture of the "lame young woman" (288-289) further exemplifies how "my master found religious sanction for his cruelty" (288). It is, however, important to note here that Douglass' does not dispute the veracity of the Bible. Rather, his concern is to question its uses to sanctify the torture of human beings and to keep a race of people in subjugation. Hence, in the *Narrative*, Douglass' slave character negotiates instances of racism within American culture, while another character, the fugitive slave narrator, makes comments about that culture, a process that Betty J. Ring terms "semantic intervention" (121); these comments criticize dominant discourses that define "slave" as "animal." Moreover, they prefigure the next stereotype of the African by showing that the "slave" must be defined with all the complexities that make up a "human being."

Douglass, the slave character, then, navigates through the morass of the stereotypes that determine the meaning of slavery. For instance, when Douglass goes to live with the Aulds in Baltimore, he becomes aware that his behavior toward white people is a learned behavior and that the white man's power to enslave the black man is based on the mastery of the word, on language. Indeed, language does not merely introduce a communication instrument, but also involves a broad orientation to knowledge and interpretation, indicating that slavery for Douglass has as much to do with knowledge as with physical bondage.

Douglass states that, when he moves to Baltimore, his early instruction is "all out of place" (274). He also apprehends that

the crouching servility, usually so acceptable a quality in a slave, did not answer when manifested toward [Mrs. Auld]. Her favor was not gained by it; she seemed to be disturbed by it. (274)

At the Auld's, and with Mrs. Auld in particular, Douglass learns to

recognize and question the cultural constructs that dictate his behavior (and to a certain extent his thoughts) toward white people, white culture, and his own life and definitions of himself. Douglass realizes, in other words, that language is “the medium through which a hierarchical structure of power is perpetuated, and the medium through which conceptions of truth, ‘order’, and ‘reality’ become established” (Ashcroft 7). As Betty J. Ring explains, Douglass understands that the

power-relations between master and slave are constructed epistemologically: deciphering the processes by which the true origins of slavery are obscured, Douglass becomes “master” of the “subject,” thus transforming his own subjected status. (121)

Accordingly, once Douglass masters the master’s discourse—that is, when he comprehends how he is first enslaved and then constructed as the nonhuman “other”—he no longer moves with “crouching servility,” as he realizes that this particular posture is not a “natural” position for a black person when in contact with a white person, but merely a behavior that the whites have required the blacks adopt (274).¹

It takes Douglass little time to extrapolate this lesson in physical demeanor into other facets of race relations, as evidenced in the ostensible “right” of whites to punish blacks or to keep blacks from literacy. More importantly, Douglass can then question the patterns of his and other slaves’ lives, and he can act to change his circumstances. For instance, Douglass learns to read by beginning his own economic exchange, an exchange that will provide him with the knowledge to free himself from being a cipher in the economic exchanges of others. He befriends the white boys of the neighborhood, and, when he is dispatched on an errand, he, significantly enough, carries his book with him:

¹ According to William L. Andrews, many slave narrators deem as turning points in their stories their realization that the dominant culture constructs them to be inferior “others” and that the slave system was a means of

marginalizing the Afro-American into the condition of not knowing who he was essentially or what her rightful status ought to be, so as to shape him or her into the most adaptable instruments for white manipulation. (*To Tell* 176)

Douglass apprehends that racial inferiority is no more than a social construct, not an inherent racial characteristic when Mrs. Auld’s “favor [is] not gained” by his “crouching servility” (274). This realization is crucial in his refashioning himself from “a slave” to “a man.”

I also used to carry bread with me, enough of which was always in the house, and to which I was always welcome; for I was much better off in this regard than many of the poor white children in our neighborhood. This bread I used to bestow upon the hungry little urchins, who, in return, would give me that more valuable bread of knowledge. (278)

In this instance, Douglass acknowledges that, in some economic respects, he was “better off” than the free white boys of the neighborhood; he lived in a house where there was enough bread, and he was free to take as much as he liked. He can then exchange that bread for reading lessons.

His use of that “privileged economic position,” being “better off,” contrasts with his declaration to those same boys: “You will be free as soon as you are twenty-one, *but I am a slave for life!* Have I not as good a right to be free as you have?” (278). This juxtaposition of Douglass’ potential for economic manipulation with Douglass as an economic cipher indicates the dichotomy between his ability to use a liberating discourse—exchanging bread for knowledge, for example—and his being defined as property, as an object of exchange, within the discourse system. Moreover, he implicitly articulates the dominant conception of slave as child. In these juxtapositions, Douglass evolves a hybrid discourse wherein two conflicting postures co-exist side by side. He is thrown into a paradoxical situation, one that is typical of the colonial scene: on the one hand, he is thrilled to discover that he is “much better off,” and, on the other hand, he is made to acknowledge the value of the very culture, “that more valuable bread of knowledge,” that keeps him in the lower rung of humanity, materially and spiritually.

Douglass’ owner, Mr. Auld, comprehends that the slaveholders’ religious and economic discourse systems keep the whites in power and the blacks enslaved. He also realizes that if Douglass learns to read, he will be able to redefine himself as “man” rather than “chattel” and that this redefinition “would forever unfit him to be a slave. He would at once become unmanageable, and of no value to his master” (274). Auld senses that Douglass is a man capable of self-definition, yet he wants to see Douglass only as an economic tool; learning, of course, will make that tool of no more use. Accordingly, Auld rightly imagines that a “chattel” will work for his owner because, being property himself, he cannot think of acquiring property. On the other hand, a “man” will want to work and produce for himself and his family, as Douglass later works in the shipyard to support himself and his wife (325).

At one crucial point, Douglass overhears Mr. Auld forbidding Mrs. Auld to teach Douglass to read. Auld's words

sank deep into [Douglass'] heart, stirred up sentiments within that lay slumbering, and called into existence an entirely new train of thought. It was a new and special revelation, explaining dark and mysterious things, with which [his] youthful understanding had struggled, but struggled in vain. (275)

Upon overhearing Auld, Douglass has words to explain his "mysterious" youthful feelings; he comes to the realization that "the white man's power to enslave the black man" (275) originates in the white man's ability to read and write, that is, to control the discourse that defines "slaves" as economic tools of value and to propagate this discourse as the "natural" way of life.²

Paradoxically, Auld's opposition to Douglass' learning to read further encourages Douglass to pursue his studies. Douglass, the slave narrator, describes the character's forbearance to learn to read as follows:

What he most dreaded, that I most desired. What he most loved, that I most hated. That which to him was a great evil, to be carefully shunned, was to me a great good, to be diligently sought; and the argument which he so warmly urged, against my learning to read, only served to inspire me with a desire and determination to learn. In learning to read, I owe almost as much to the bitter opposition of my master as I do to the kindly aid of my mistress. I acknowledge the benefit of both. (275)

While Douglass' careful crossing of "dreaded" and "desired," "loved" and "hated," "evil—shunned" and "good—sought," point to the diametrically opposed positions of master and slave, debunking thereby the contented slave myth, they more importantly indicate Douglass' ability to control the structure of his words and ideas. In his crossing of "bitter opposition of my master" and "kindly aid of my

² Houston A. Baker, Jr., emphasizes that the dominant culture, as epitomized for Douglass in Mr. Auld, attempts to control perceptions of what is "natural" or "real" through linguistic markers arising out of "semantic competition involved in culture contact" ("Autobiographical" 247). In order to keep slaves and African Americans as a means of production, then, the American slaveholding culture evolved a circular system by which slaves were enslavable because they were slaves. In other words, as Douglass apprehends after overhearing Mr. Auld's words, the dominant culture asserts that slaves are illiterate, and it is therefore forbidden to teach slaves to read. Moreover, with this logic, slaves are less than human and therefore enslavable because they are unable to read. As a slave, then, Douglass is specifically constructed within a disabling master discourse which conceives of slaves—African Americans, in this case—as a degenerate population in order to justify its conquest and rule.

mistress,” Douglass acknowledges the cruelties and kindnesses that contributed to his development as a man, the paradoxes that controlled his life as a slave, as well as his impetus for mastering the discourses that helped make him free. Through those discourses, then, he posits himself as Auld’s economic tool, and he declares his use of economic tools to educate himself. More significantly, he uses a number of sophisticated rhetorical strategies to posit a counterdiscourse debunking the popular notion of “slave” as “animal.”

Furthermore, his strikingly simple statement “I acknowledge the benefit of both” places Douglass, the slave narrator, in control of his lived experiences and the self that emerges from those experiences. Neither Mr. nor Mrs. Auld creates the man who emerges from “bitter opposition” and “kindly aid.” Instead, Douglass fashions himself as a man in the process of learning to read, calling attention to Douglass, the author, crafting Douglass, the character, and Douglass, the slave narrator. Embedded in Douglass’ above-cited statement is, moreover, a tacit resistance to the kinds of pressures put upon him by a master discourse that seeks to annul his self as constituted in the present. The first-person pronoun with which he begins his affirmative statement is further evidence that he can now raise his voice, that he is capable of more than just relating the bare facts of his bondage. In these respects, he becomes a subject manipulating discourses, no longer discourses’ mere object.³

Significantly, the scene in which Douglass the slave character manipulates economic discourse by exchanging bread for knowledge is followed by Douglass the slave narrator describing the importance of mastery of language. In the dialogues and speeches found in *The Columbian Orator*, the first book Douglass owns, he finds the words, phrases, and sentences that allow him to articulate his views on slavery. His reading of this book provides him with the ammunition to battle the dominant culture with its own weapons: he

³ The synchresis Douglass uses to describe his desire to learn to read, and by extension to be free, closely parallels what Lucinda H. MacKethan takes to be one of the central paradoxes of slavery:

One had to know one’s letters in order to be free, but in America, one had to be free in order to learn one’s letters. In this double bind the fugitive slave found the greatest challenge to his achievement of full human status. (56)

Frederick Douglass the slave narrator systematically builds this paradox, this “double bind,” into the structure of his narrative. Theoretically, such a “double bind” provides a framework within which identity is constituted by difference.

acquires the words for “a bold denunciation of slavery and a powerful vindication of human rights” (278). Of course, these tools are later put to use in his career as an orator on the abolitionist lecture circuit and as an author and editor. John Louis Lucaites argues that when Douglass orates he

puts himself in the position of speaking to his audience as a dialogical other, rather than speaking for them as a duly constituted member of their community. (57)

In the same manner, Douglass positions himself as a dialogical other to his reading audience when he describes his slave character’s initiation into white discourses.

For instance, Auld had warned his wife not to teach Douglass to learn to read, for, “if you give a n—— an inch, he will take an ell” (274). Douglass the slave narrator, reflecting back on his “stealing” the time to learn to read, positions himself as wiser and more experienced than the character grappling with the alphabet. He signifies ironically on Mr. Auld’s words when he proclaims that “Mistress, in teaching me the alphabet, had given me the *inch*, and no precaution could prevent me from taking the *ell*” (277). Douglass here takes the words Auld uses and gives them an entirely new meaning, which marks his separation from the site of his owner’s control and privilege. He, in other words, appropriates his owner’s language by fully adapting it to his own interests. In this context, his appropriation is

the process by which the language is taken and made to “bear the burden” of one’s own cultural experience, or as Raja Rao puts it, to “convey in a language that is not one’s own the spirit that is one’s own.” (Ashcroft 38-39)

This is precisely why Mr. Auld assumes that giving any type of encouragement to Douglass (or any slave) would “spoil” him, would make him greedy for more freedom: Mastery of a language, and of the discursive systems that inform what speakers of that language can conceive, places an object of discourse into a subject position.

Douglass’ words do indicate that Auld was right. Once Douglass learns the alphabet, he wants to learn to read, for in reading and writing he sees his pathway to freedom:

I looked forward to a time at which it would be safe for me to escape. I was too young to think of doing so immediately; besides, I wished to *learn how to write*, as I might have occasion to *write* my own pass. I consoled myself with the hope that I should one day find a good chance. Meanwhile, I would *learn to write*. (280: emphasis mine)

Douglass’ somehow obsessive concern with learning how to write

betokens an urge to achieve a degree of self-determination, self-education, and self-esteem, all of which are highly admired by the American audience.⁴

Houston Baker maintains that this tension appears in the multiple meanings Auld's negative appellation is forced to assume. While Auld uses the term, "n—," as "subhuman agency of labor," Baker argues that "agent capable of education" is the marker that emerges from Douglass' manipulations of the master's language ("Autobiographical" 247). Douglass does not identify himself totally with the members of the dominant culture even though he uses their discourses to inscribe himself into that world, for Auld's pejorative term is implied in Douglass' use of Auld's words. Thus, Douglass assumes a position inside the master's discourse, both as a subject manipulating that discourse and as an object of that discourse. In this respect, Douglass offers a new rendering of "slave" to those of the dominant culture, a rendering beyond "an agent capable of education." "Slave," as Douglass has constructed himself, emerges as one who has an ability to perceive the discursive systems by which he can be ideologically labelled and who can manipulate those discourses to posit and provoke new, alternative definitions.

Baker notes the irony in Douglass' description of Mr. Auld, "who wants a silently laboring brute" but who is ultimately rendered in Douglass' *Narrative* as an object fashioned by Douglass and "visible to himself and a learned reading public only through the discourse of the articulate black spokesman" (Baker "Autobiographical" 247). Douglass' portrayal of Auld (and Covey and the other whites in the *Narrative*) is as Baker indicates, an ironic troping on dominant discursive systems that posit him as "not of the human family" (Walker 20) and thus unable to apprehend or manipulate those systems. I suggest that Douglass, in his role as a narrator and as an author inscribing that narrator, is also manufacturing "slave" as a "dialogical other" who identifies the complexities, ironies, and contradictions of the dominant ideology, a position in keeping with his role as the interpreter of his own text.

⁴ In this regard, Rafia Zafar rightly compares Frederick Douglass to Benjamin Franklin, the quintessential American self-made man. Zafar maintains that both Douglass and Franklin are cultural heroes, having written similar autobiographies that emphasize "the rise from obscurity to renown, the bondage to a kinsman, the education of a young man, and the attitudes towards self vis-a-vis the community" (99). Like Franklin, Douglass, in his self-conscious act of writing his life, stresses the all-American story of "rags to riches." At the same time, however, Douglass' *Narrative* subtly indicts the white culture that denies blacks the economic and political freedoms that would allow more of them to achieve economic prosperity.

Douglass' most significant identification of ideological irony, and the most noted rhetorical device used in his *Narrative*, is the chiasmus: "You have seen how a man was made a slave; you shall see how a slave was made a man" (294). Douglass constructs this chiasmus to foreground the notion of "man" by placing the word at the beginning and at the end (the alpha and the omega, the whole) of the rhetorical device. His use of the technique, moreover, harkens back to the Puritan tradition of using this crossing to mimic Christ's cross and to call the power of God into the words. Douglass thus brings the power of an American literary and political heritage into his text, subtly enhancing his own credibility and lending weight to his words.

In thus manipulating these rhetorical techniques, Douglass links his life, his journey, and his created self with the Puritan authors of conversion narratives.⁵ These authors, according to Sacvan Bercovitch, subscribed to the Reformed notion that

every man was his own church, so too, now that the Bible was made universally available and declared to be sole authority, every man became his own exegete. (28)

However, each individual could claim this authority only if he "had transformed himself in His image ... [if] interpreter and text confirmed one another in their mutual *imitatio*" (Bercovitch 28). Douglass, by manipulating literary techniques canonized in America by the Puritans and tropes of self popular in America since the Puritans, exploits the authority vested in them in order to reinforce his narrative, his voice, and his construction of his slave narrator. He then becomes "his own exegete," interpreting his life and manufacturing himself in the tradition of a Puritan "saint," and, by the same token, demystifying a whole constellation of ideological functions in his owner's discourse.

Therefore, Douglass emphasizes his and other slaves' humanity, declaring himself to be essentially a "man" before he was made a slave, and, by necessary extension, to have the same inalienable rights as any other human being. His use of the verb "made" markedly foregrounds the fact that his is not a natural condition, but the product of the dominant ideology. He, in other words, was ideologically constructed as a slave. In terms of reader response, such a

⁵ David Van Leer offers a detailed analysis of the strategies of Puritan conversion narratives found in Douglass' *Narrative* in his "Reading Slavery: The Anxiety of Ethnicity in Douglass' *Narrative*" (see especially 120-121).

stylistic device as chiasmus causes the reader, as Betty J. Ring argues,

to anticipate the process of slave-unmaking and yet simultaneously enacts it. In so doing, it also functions as a synecdoche for the text as a whole which itself evidences the unmaking it claims only to show or represent. (120)

In this sense, Douglass' use of chiasmus becomes a speech act that fashions him as a "man" or a "human being" in a society where, as Garrison maintains, mastery of discourse is the defining feature of a being's position on "the scale of humanity" (248). Because Douglass can fashion a chiasmus, indeed, because he can master discourses and write a narrative of his life, he is, in fact, a "man" or a "human." What finally emerges from Douglass' use of chiasmus and similarly sophisticated rhetorical tropes is the urge to establish a distinctive African American identity that alters epistemic notions of African Americans.

Once Douglass has come to these realizations, of course, he can no longer be "a slave," for a slave is, by dominant definition, "not a man." Douglass, in fact, articulates that in order to be a "contented slave," the type of slave that the Southerners vowed their slaves were, "it is necessary to make a thoughtless one ... to darken his moral and mental vision, and ... to annihilate the power of reason" (315). Moreover, he claims that his owner Thomas Auld, the owner he finally escaped from, continued to advise him "to complete thoughtlessness of the future ... to depend solely on him for happiness" (317). Thus, Douglass links the loss of thinking ability, the loss of the desire to think, and the inability to manipulate systems of thought—"the power of reason"—as the deciding factors in making a man a slave.

Douglass, however, refused to give up his "intellectual nature, in order to contentment in slavery" (317). His struggle against Auld and the nearly overwhelming ideological system of oppression that buttressed Auld's position indicates that Douglass' construction of himself as a subject in his *Narrative* is a subversion of the dominant stereotype that held that slaves had no agency. Furthermore, Douglass' slave self may also be considered what Michel Pecheux deems a "disidentification," that is, the outcome of combining political and discursive practices that both identify with and counter-identify with the dominant ideologies. Douglass' fashioning of his slave character and his slave narrator is a "disidentification," then, because the self created is a manipulation of the given social notion of what constitutes a "subject." Douglass' narrator, in other words,

does not merely embody the destruction of the hegemonic concept of “slave” or “African American” but alters that concept (Pecheux 158-9).⁶

From a different perspective, several critics assume that Douglass’ use of dominant discourses in his *Narrative* results in his inability to thoroughly articulate the reality of the slave population at large. For example, Houston Baker maintains that

the voice of the unwritten self, once it is subjected to the linguistic codes, literary conventions, and audience expectations of a literate population, is perhaps never again the authentic voice of black American slavery. It is, rather, the voice of a self transformed by an autobiographical act into a sharer in the general public discourse about slavery. (“Autobiographical” 253)

Douglass himself indicates, as I have examined previously, that he was changed the moment he realized that the use of discourses constituted the white man’s power to enslave the black man. More significantly, “the voice of the ... self” who had previously been a slave but who could manipulate and reconstruct the master’s literary and discursive tools, a self who analeptically narrates incidents of his own silence, of his inarticulate self, was an “authentic voice of black American slavery” in that he articulated the discursively constructed reality faced both by slaves and by black Americans.

David Van Leer also argues that the paradoxes in Frederick Douglass’ *Narrative* and the ironies in contemporary culture that Douglass indirectly indicates to his readers, sabotage his position, which is that slavery should be abolished. Van Leer states that “Douglass’ model of individual triumph over adversity tends to undermine the plea for social reform at the heart of all antebellum slave narratives” (128). While Van Leer indicates that Douglass’ story, and Douglass’ articulateness, may implicate those slaves who do not or cannot escape (because those slaves left in slavery might be perceived as not intelligent or determined enough to escape their bondage), he overlooks Douglass’ portrayal of himself and his story as a discursive interaction with the dominant culture. While Van Leer rightly assumes that Douglass’ *Narrative* is a “plea for social reform,” he fails to confront the multiple meanings “social reform” takes in Douglass’ text. In other words, Van Leer ignores the fact that access to cultural, spiritual, and economic improvement (the Franklinesque

⁶ Pecheux maintains that a dynamic exists between the subject and discourse, what he terms a “third modality.” This third modality “constitutes a *working of the subject-form* and not just its *abolition*” (159).

“rags to riches” via self-improvement) was not available to slaves except under unusual circumstances. Douglass, and Olaudah Equiano before him, seek equal access and are successful.⁷

Douglass’ slave narrator and the text itself are a complex of interactions with the dominant culture that presume not merely to inform the public that slavery is evil, but to position the slave self as a manipulator of the discourses that dictate the reality of slave life. Douglass’ construction of himself (in all forms) in his *Narrative* is, then, a discriminating critique of the hegemony that labels sentient beings as “animals” and forces them into subservience on grounds of a supposed racial inferiority. More importantly, it is a dialogue that debunks epistemic notions of “slave” even as it posits new definitions.

In antebellum America, a majority of African Americans, both free blacks and slaves, lived lives proscribed by institutions of power that drew justification from ideological assumptions as to the nature of Africans and their descendants. Douglass’ construction of his slave narrator as a being that assumes multiple subject positions in many situations demystifies racial stereotypes in such a way as to expose charges of “inferiority” and “cultural poverty” as mere social constructs. Recognizing that the parameters that confined African Americans were discursively constructed, Douglass strove to legitimize a unique “slave” or “African American” self that both confronted the dominant culture’s notion that slaves were either “animals” or “children” and that placed that culture in dialogue with him, with its notions of “slave,” and with the discursive strategies by which slaveholders imposed and maintained their “superiority.”

Samantha Manchester Earley
School of Arts and Letters
Indiana University Southeast

Works Cited

Andrews, William L. *To Tell a Free Story. The First Century of Afro-American Autobiography 1760-1865*. Urbana: U of Illinois P, 1986.

⁷ See Olaudah Equiano. *The Interesting Life of Olaudah Equiano, or Gustavus Vassa the African. Written by Himself. Classic Slave Narratives*. Ed. Henry Louis Gates, Jr. New York: NAL, 1987: 1-186. Equiano also manipulates economics and economic discourses in order to free himself and to construct the self of his slave narrator as a human able to apprehend and combat the contemporary racial discourses of the dominant culture.

- Ashcroft, Bill, Gareth Griffiths, and Helen Tiffin. *The Empire Writes Back: Theory and Practice in Post Colonial Literature*. New York: Routledge, 1989.
- Baker, Houston A., Jr. "Autobiographical Acts and the Voice of the Southern Slave." *The Slave's Narrative*. Eds. Charles T. Davis and Henry Louis Gates, Jr. Oxford: Oxford UP, 1985: 242-261.
- Bercovitch, Sacvan. *The Puritan Origins of the American Self*. New Haven: Yale UP, 1975.
- Bhabha Homi K. "Signs Taken for Wonders: Questions of Ambivalence and Authority Under a Tree Outside Delhi, May 1817." *Critical Inquiry*. 12 (Autumn 1985): 144-165.
- Douglass, Frederick. *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, An American Slave Written by Himself. Classic Slave Narratives*. Ed. Henry Louis Gates, Jr. New York: Mentor NAL, 1987: 241-331.
- Equiano, Olaudah. *The Interesting Life of Olaudah Equiano, or Gustavus Vassa, the African. Written by Himself Classic Slave Narratives*. Ed. Henry Louis Gates, Jr. New York: Mentor NAL, 1987: 1-186.
- Lucaites, John Louis. "The Irony of 'Equality' in Black Discourse: The Case of Frederick Douglass's 'What to the Slave is the Fourth of July?'" *Rhetoric and Political Culture in Nineteenth-Century America*. Ed. Thomas W. Benson. East Lansing: Michigan State UP, 1997: 47-89.
- Mackethan, Lucinda H. "From Fugitive Slave to Man of Letters: The Conversion of Frederick Douglass." *Journal of Narrative Technique*. 16.1 (Winter 1986): 55-71.
- Pecheux, Michel. *Language, Semantics, and Ideology*. Trans. Harbaus Nagpal. New York: St. Martin's Press, 1982.
- Ring, Betty J. "'Painting By Numbers': Figuring Frederick Douglass." *The Discourse of Slavery: Aphra Behn to Toni Morrison*. Eds. Carl Plasa and Betty J. Ring. London: Routledge, 1994: 118-143.
- Van Leer, David. "Reading Slavery: The Anxiety of Ethnicity in Douglass' Narrative." *Frederick Douglass. New Literary and Historical Essays*. Ed. Eric J. Sundquist. Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1990: 118-140.
- Walker, David. *Walker's Appeal in Four Articles*. (1829) New York: Arno Press and the New York Times, 1969.
- Zafar, Rafia. "Franklinian Douglass: The Afro-American as Representative Man." *Frederick Douglass. New Literary and Historical Essays*. Ed. Eric J. Sundquist. Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1990: 99-117.