

CYNTHIA R. NIELSEN

RESISTANCE IS NOT FUTILE: FREDERICK DOUGLASS
ON PANOPTIC PLANTATIONS AND THE UN-MAKING OF
DOCILE BODIES AND ENSLAVED SOULS

I

FREDERICK DOUGLASS, IN HIS first autobiography, *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass*, describes how his sociopolitical identity was scripted by the white other and how his spatiotemporal existence was likewise constrained through constant surveillance and disciplinary *dispositifs*. Even so, Douglass was able to assert his humanity through creative acts of resistance. In this essay, I highlight the ways in which Douglass refused to accept the other-imposed narrative, demonstrating with his life the truth of his being—a human *being* unwilling to be classified as thing or property. As I engage selected passages and key events from Douglass’s narrative, I likewise explore the ways in which the resistance tactics he performed complement Michel Foucault’s elaboration of power relations and resistance possibilities, as well as Mikhail Bakhtin’s notions of authoritative and internally persuasive discourse. Even in a brutal context such as the U.S. chattel-slave system, Douglass, as we shall see, was able to work creatively within and through oppressive, exploitative, and blatantly racist sociopolitical structures and discourses in order to subvert the system actively seeking to suppress, if not to eradicate, his humanity.

Besides sociopolitical, economic, and Enlightenment-inspired anti-black narratives, Douglass also encountered, to borrow J. Kameron Carter’s term, “pseudotheological” racist narratives. Though himself a Christian, because of the way in which the Christian narrative was taken up, perverted, and used to bolster proslavery arguments and to

construct blacks as subhuman, Douglass became an ardent critic of (white) American Christianity. In fact, one of Douglass's most taxing existential and spiritual trials involved coming to terms with American Christianity's support of, participation in, and justification for the institution of chattel slavery and the blatant hypocrisy required daily to execute that project. Recognition of this tension provides an opening to view Douglass as a sociopolitical, religious critic "from below," one whose prophetic voice cries out from the underside of modernity in order to expose the exclusivity, injustice, and monochrome hue of "We the People" and the utter irrationality and duplicity of the whitewashed necropolis proclaiming itself "The City Upon a Hill."¹

In the opening chapter of *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass*, Douglass immediately introduces the reader to a theme he will develop and elaborate throughout his autobiography, namely, the reduction of slaves to the status of (nonrational) animal or beast. As Douglass explains, he, like most slaves, was uncertain as to his actual age and had never seen any record of his own birth.² "By far the larger part of the slaves know as little of their ages as horses know of theirs, and it is the wish of most masters within my knowledge to keep their slaves thus ignorant."³ To inquire of one's master concerning records, one's birth date, and related matters was to show signs of a "restless spirit" (*NL*, p. 15).

Not only was Douglass kept ignorant of his own age, but he had to rely on what he could weave together from fragmented conversations and bits of gossip he had overheard concerning the identity of his father. "My father was a white man. He was admitted to be such by all I ever heard speak of my parentage. The opinion was also whispered that my master was my father" (p. 15). Liaisons of this sort between masters and female slaves were common and point (among other things) to the irrationality of the hegemonic, proslavery discourse and the self-deception in which its participants engaged. That is, on the one hand, slaves were said to be nonpersons, subhuman, more or less beasts; yet masters regularly raped and sexually abused their slaves, indicating that they themselves did not believe their own narrative, but were unwilling to give up their place of privilege and its attendant "benefits." The institution of chattel slavery, founded upon biobehavioral racial essentialism and maintained through various legal, cultural, and economic structures, institutions, and communally accepted practices, created something akin to a legally ambiguous or "lawless space" (Giorgio Agamben's term) for white, male slaveowners.⁴ Like Gyges hidden from sight when sporting his magical ring and bent on satisfying his desires at the expense of others, these

men used the “invisibility powers” of institutional and systemic racism and their privileged place within that system to exploit and destroy fellow human beings.

The other side, so to speak, of the dominant narrative’s construction of the slave’s subjectivity is its active erasing or rescripting of his or her history and culture. One way to engage in this erasure is to dis-integrate, divide, and ultimately destroy familial bonds. Douglass’s account of his own experience of forced separation from his mother suggests that the practice was common, and highlights its negative impact. “My mother and I were separated when I was but an infant—before I knew her as my mother. . . . Frequently, before the child has reached its twelfth month, its mother is taken from it” (*NL*, pp. 15–16). The child was then moved to a different location—perhaps a different plantation altogether—and placed with an elderly female slave, who, given her frailty and age, was neither profitable nor pleasurable to the master. As Douglass observes, this practice rendered virtually impossible the emotional bonding that ought to occur between mother and child, and resulted in many women suppressing their affections for their children as a defense mechanism to shield them from the pain of separation and loss (p. 16).

Although he was able to spend a few hours with his mother in the evenings—after she had worked a full day and had walked twelve miles to visit him—Douglass was not allowed to visit her when she fell ill, nor was he permitted to be present when she died and was laid to rest (p. 16). “Never having enjoyed, to any considerable extent, her soothing presence, her tender and watchful care, I received the tidings of her death with much the same emotions I should have probably felt at the death of a stranger” (p. 16). Significant temporal markers that most of us take for granted—one’s own birth date—as well as the spatial presence required for familial cohesion to occur were denied Douglass. His spatiotemporal existence, like that of the other beasts of the field, was disciplined and forged by the workday and work season—“planting-time, harvest-time, cherry-time, spring-time” (p. 15). Here we have the forced reduction of a human being to a disciplined, efficient, labor-producing tool, existing and toiling for the benefit of the master’s self-serving ends. In other words, constructing the slave subjectivity involves both breaking the person’s spirit via dehumanizing practices, as well as creating what Foucault calls “docile bodies.” Let us turn to explore similarities between Foucault’s notion of panopticism and Douglass’s experiences of disciplinary practices on the plantation.

II

In *Discipline and Punish*, Foucault develops a notion often referenced in the literature as panopticism. Drawing upon Jeremy Bentham's Panopticon, a towerlike structure designed to facilitate simultaneous surveillance of prisoners from a stable centralized location, Foucault describes how prisons and other institutions continue the panoptic tradition, albeit with ever-increasing technological sophistication. As Foucault explains, the very architectural structure of the Panopticon allows the gaze of the warden upon the prisoners to be experienced as perpetual and inescapable. Through various means—from psychological manipulation to the application of physical violence—the prisoners are made aware of this ever-present gaze and over time the external surveillance is internalized. Although Douglass's writings precede Foucault's by more than a century, the former's vivid descriptions of life as a slave in a racialized society parallel and corroborate the latter's analyses, which is not to deny genuine historical, institutional, and technological differences.

For example, Douglass describes how Mr. Covey, a well-known slave-breaker to whom he was sent for "disciplinary purposes," exerted his own pantoptic gaze upon the slaves. In order to maximize his slaves' production and to make his slaves "feel that he was ever present," Mr. Covey would approach the slaves clandestinely and at irregular times in order to catch them by surprise (p. 56). While the slaves were laboring in the fields, Covey would even crawl on all fours to maintain his stealth. Then he would appear suddenly, yelling loudly and commanding the slaves to get to work (p. 57). As Douglass explains, since this was Covey's customary *modus operandi*, the slaves felt it dangerous "to stop a single minute. His comings were like a thief in the night. He appeared to us as being ever at hand. He was under every tree, behind every stump, in every bush, and at every window, on the plantation" (p. 57). Notice how Douglass employs biblical images in his description of Covey: the New Testament compares Jesus's second advent, of which none but the Father knows the precise time or day, to a coming "like a thief in the night" (1 Thess. 5:2, NRSV). In accordance with my earlier mention of slaveholders operating in lawless spaces, Douglass here describes Covey as mimicking the divine attribute of omnipresence in order to impose his will upon his subjects and further assert his sovereignty. If this characterization is correct, then Covey's actions reveal not only his own perverse view of power, but they also tell us something about his

view of God. In other words, Covey does not see God as a lover wooing his wandering beloved or a shepherd willing to risk his life to bring back his straying sheep; rather, his God must assert his power and authority upon his subjects in order to rule them by fear.

Although lacking the sophistication of twentieth-century surveillance technologies, Covey's maneuverings and strategies nonetheless impacted the slaves in a way similar to the effect carceral technologies have on prisoners. That is, Covey was able to make his gaze be experienced *as if* he were always present. In other words, Covey, like the Panopticon, took on a ubiquitous aura even when absent. Though in reality limited by his physical existence, his practice of surprise attacks, coupled with the stark penalties exercised upon those caught idle or not working efficiently, allowed Covey to transcend his spatial limitations. Having created an atmosphere of fear in which the slaves lived and moved and had their being, Covey's actual physical presence was in effect no longer needed. That is, the sign of a broken slave was the internal inscription of the master's gaze, or in more Foucauldian terms, the interiorization of the panoptic gaze and the subsequent creation of a new subjectivity, the slave subject.

III

As mentioned above, Douglass at age sixteen was sent by his master Thomas Auld to Mr. Covey—a reputed slave-breaker—to deal with Douglass's "disciplinary issues." Although I shall analyze in detail Douglass's literacy in a subsequent section, it is important to mention that, prior to his arrival at Covey's plantation, Douglass had already learned to read. At this point in his life, Douglass had come to realize that "mental" freedom gained through literacy was insufficient. That is, under the all-pervasive white gaze of an oppressive, racialized society, no matter how educated he became, he continued to be viewed and treated as less than a person, as property, as a tool for the white man's projects and economic gains. The insufficiency of this "inner" freedom is seen in Douglass's narration of his fight with Covey.

Describing his first six months with Covey, he writes, "Scarce a week passed without his whipping me. I was seldom free from a sore back" (p. 56). He then recounts how Covey worked him day and night and in all weather conditions, and how at last the brutal, inhumane work schedules and regimented violence broke him.

I was broken in body, soul, and spirit. My natural elasticity was crushed, my intellect languished, the disposition to read departed, the cheerful spark that lingered about my eye died; the dark night of slavery closed in upon me; and behold a man transformed into a brute! (p. 58)

Douglass's freedom gained through literacy—an accomplishment that was itself an "argument" against the white hegemonic discourse pronouncing blacks as subhuman, incapable of "higher" rational reflection, and thus in need of (white) masters—proved ultimately insufficient. As a human being, he was, after all, embodied, and his embodiment included black skin; as such, he remained bound and subject to the (irrational) whims of white society. No matter how literate, educated, and articulate he became, the dominant discourse scripted him as less than human while the racialized social apparatuses—including Covey's panoptic plantation—actively sought to suppress his intellectual achievements and to crush his spirit, reducing him to a beast-like existence in order to "prove" the veracity of their narrative.

After one of Covey's particularly cruel beatings, Douglass decided to flee. He returned to his former owner, Mr. Auld, who, lacking all compassion, commanded him to go back to Covey. As Douglass's "dark night of slavery" engulfed him, he contemplated suicide, the possibility of living in the woods until he eventually died for lack of food, or the dismal prospect of returning to Covey. After weighing his options, Douglass decided to go back to Covey. His initial attempt to return failed, resulting in a second successful return on Easter Sunday. Upon entering the plantation, he passed Covey, who, to Douglass's surprise, interacted positively with him.

On Monday, however, we are back to business as usual. While Douglass labored that morning in a stable, Covey attacked him. Rather than remain a docile slave, Douglass decided to defend himself and fight, even if his action resulted in his own death. "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 hard by the throat; and as I did so, I rose" (p. 64). His resolve took Covey by surprise, and Douglass could see for the first time fear and uncertainty in his master's eyes. The two struggled for over two hours until Covey finally gave up.

IV

Another important layer in Douglass's multivalent text is his critique of (white) American Christianity. Because he himself identified as a Christian, writing and speaking openly about faith, his local experience of Christianity—or rather the distorted façade masquerading as Christianity—gave rise to extreme existential and spiritual strain. Having both endured his own lashings, whippings, and beatings and having witnessed countless cruelties performed by so-called “religious” men on the bodies of other slaves, Douglass was compelled to speak out against the hypocrisy and injustice of those claiming to follow the Suffering Servant while maiming and torturing their own servants. We get a glimpse of Douglass's righteous anger in his explanation of why his new owner, Mr. Freeland, with whom he lived after his time on Covey's plantation, was far superior to Covey. Not only did Freeland treat slaves with some semblance of respect and with significantly more compassion than Covey, but, more important for Douglass, “he [Freeland] made no pretensions to, or profession of, religion; and this . . . was truly a great advantage” (p. 68). Douglass goes on to describe the noxious religious atmosphere in which he and other slaves were forced to breathe. The so-called “religion of the south,” he says, is “a mere covering for the most horrid crimes—a justifier of the most appalling barbarity,—a sanctifier of the most hateful frauds,—and a dark shelter under which the darkest, foulest, grossest, and most infernal deeds of slaveholders find the strongest protection” (p. 68).

Realizing that some may misinterpret his remarks, take them out of context, or turn them against him in order to claim that his Christianity is nothing more than a political ploy to attract a broader, more conservative readership, Douglass adds an appendix to address such accusations. Drawing upon John Sekora's work, J. Kameron Carter points out that not only was Douglass's narrative a critique of socially constructed racialized identities, but it was a critique of American Christianity: “This critique and the contest over the symbolic construction of identity that it signifies is not operative simply at the level of the eleven chapters that make up the body of the text”; a struggle was also “at work in the literary battle being waged between the *Narrative's* preface and the concluding appendix.”⁵

The preface to Douglass's book was written by a well-known (white) northern abolitionist, William Lloyd Garrison. As Sekora explains, by the time Douglass wrote his *Narrative* in the nineteenth century, the slave

narrative as a literary genre launched in the previous century had an established history with set forms, including an introduction by a white man in order to legitimize the validity, veracity, and general worthiness of the text.⁶ Playing the role of white editor/authenticator, Garrison, qua authority figure and member of the supposed intellectually superior class, pens the preface in order to assure his white readership of Douglass's literary and cognitive abilities and to guarantee the trustworthiness of his account. For example, Garrison describes Douglass as able to achieve "high attainments as an intellectual and moral being—needing nothing but a comparatively small amount of cultivation to make him an ornament to society and a blessing to his race" (*NL*, p. 4).

Here we have instances of what Sekora calls "white authentication" of black narratives. Although in Douglass's text, the "authenticating documents" occur only in the preface, in the early forms of slave narratives we find documents of this sort enveloping the text; hence, the appropriateness of Sekora's essay title, "Black Message/White Envelope." As was the case in the narratives of the eighteenth century, one often encountered "a frontispiece portrait and testimonial letters" validating the subject's existence and identity. Likewise, these letters served as guarantors of the slave's "moral and intellectual character" assuring the (white) reader "that he was reporting events as he knew them" ("BM/WE," p. 497). Even here, where the slave is supposed to be allowed to speak and tell his or her story, the white other in the form of editor and reputed intellectual superior feels compelled to control and direct the slave.

As our analysis of Douglass's text has shown, the slave owner sought to confine and constrain not only the slave's physical existence but his intellectual development and his linguistic expression. The masters were, no doubt, acutely aware of what Foucault calls the "double-sidedness" of discourse. On the one hand, the slave was given at least some minimal linguistic space for self-expression and for carrying out one's daily work; yet, on the other hand, the slave's discourse itself—whether in the form of songs filled with coded language issuing instructions for secret meetings or folk stories recited to the master's children at bedtime—served to indict the dominant narrative scripting slaves as subhuman. In addition, the master's continual obsession to render the slave mute, inarticulate, and docile "reveals the dependence of masters upon bondsmen" (p. 485); that is, to *be* master required in some genuine sense an ongoing silencing of the slave, rendering him either literally silent or disciplining him into silence by way of educating him to give the "proper answers"

consonant with the “master text” (p. 485). Ironically, white abolitionist leaders, such as Garrison, presuming that they must legitimate, order, and maintain control over the form and content of the slave narrative continue—albeit in a less violent way—to dehumanize the slave, muting his voice before he utters a sound.⁷

V

Previously, I had mentioned that Douglass learned to read in spite of numerous obstacles. His beginning steps—learning the alphabet—came through the tutelage of Sophie Auld, the wife of his master at that time, Thomas Auld, who eventually sent Douglass to live with Mr. Covey. His reading lessons, however, were ended abruptly when Mr. Auld realized what was happening. Douglass recounts Mr. Auld’s reprimand to his wife and his commentary on why one ought not educate a slave.

“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. 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.” (*NL*, p. 37)

Auld’s remarks on the dangers of teaching a slave to read and the seriousness with which he spoke made a strong impression on young Douglass. In fact, a few lines later he says that he “now understood . . . the white man’s power to enslave the black man. It was a grand achievement, and I prized it highly. From that moment, I understood the pathway from slavery to freedom” (*NL*, pp. 37–38). At that point in his life, Douglass vowed to himself that whatever it might take, he would learn to read. His motivation was in large part due to the strong opposition he sensed in Mr. Auld to his becoming literate. “What he most dreaded, that I most desired . . . ; 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” (*NL*, p. 38). In short, at this point in Douglass’s journey, he was convinced that his freedom could be achieved primarily through the attainment of literacy. Thus, he committed himself to achieving this goal at all costs.

Douglass also perceived a connection between knowledge and power

and that the asymmetrical master/slave relation was maintained by keeping the slave uneducated. Knowledge must flow in one direction—from master to slave. The (dominating) authority defining the master depends in part upon his ability to keep the slave ignorant and to (at least) create the impression of the master's own intellectual superiority and ability to exercise local as well as sociopolitical and legal disciplinary actions should the slave rebel. As Lisa Sisco observes, "Douglass understands that literacy can provide the power to re-define relationships of authority."⁸ Literacy, however, must be understood as polysemous, dynamic, and occurring in stages. To emphasize the processive character of literacy, Sisco describes Douglass's phase in which he realized that the productive nature of the power relation between master and slave was constituted and maintained in part by keeping the slave ignorant, as "pre-literate" ("WSL," p. 196). At this stage, Douglass is not yet literate but is "attracted to an abstract ideal of literacy" (p. 196). As we shall see shortly, once he advances in his abilities to read, write, and engage in public discourse, he begins to experience the very double-sidedness of literacy described by Mr. Auld—for the slave, education "could do him no good, but a great deal of harm. It would make him discontented and unhappy" (*NL*, p. 37).

Sisco then brings Mikhail Bakhtin's conceptions of "authoritative discourse" and "internally persuasive discourse" into conversation with Douglass's account of his movement from slavery to freedom. According to Bakhtin, individuals find themselves always and ever in the process of an "ideological becoming," which is a "process of selectively assimilating the words of others."⁹ As historical beings we not only appropriate actively the discourses of others, but we are also shaped passively by these multiple discourses constituting what Bakhtin calls "heteroglossia." According to Bakhtin, "authoritative discourse" or an "authoritative word" is more than simply a set of rules, directives, and fact-like information; it "strives rather to determine the very bases of our ideological interrelations with the world, the very basis of our behavior, it performs here as *authoritative discourse*, and an *internally persuasive discourse*" (*DI*, p. 342).

In broad strokes, authoritative discourse, whether "religious, political, or moral," comes from those holding positions of authority—"the word of a father, of adults and of teachers etc." (p. 342). In contrast, internally persuasive discourse in its most common variant "is denied all privilege, backed up by no authority at all, and is frequently not even acknowledged in society (not by public opinion, nor by scholarly norms, nor by criticism), not even in the legal code" (p. 342). The latter also

cannot but arise out of the heteroglossia of authoritative discourses; yet it can be reharmonized and reframed in a way that “pure” authoritative discourse cannot. The latter comes “with its authority already fused to it. The authoritative word is located in a distanced zone, organically connected with a past that is felt to be hierarchically higher. It is, so to speak, the word of the fathers” (p. 342).

Because its history as already accepted authority precedes us, authoritative discourse is not simply one discourse among others. Rather, it resists egalitarian status and imposes itself as sovereign. Manifesting itself in the form of religious, political, or scientific dogma, such discourse “is given (it sounds) in lofty spheres, not those of familiar contact. Its language is a special (as it were, hieratic) language. . . . It is akin to taboo, i.e., a name that must not be taken in vain” (p. 342). In other words, one ought not question authoritative discourse—to do so is itself a transgressive and treasonous act, a sign of rebellion or perhaps backwardness. Not only does a certain rigidity and calcification characterize authoritative discourse, but likewise its “framing context” is immovable, frozen. Such language “remains sharply demarcated, compact and inert: . . . it is fully complete, it has but a single meaning, the letter is fully sufficient to the sense and calcifies it” (p. 343). One cannot improvise with authoritative discourse, nor can one reharmonize its melodies; it requires a unison voice; it demands complete replication with no key changes, modulations, or ornamentations. It calls for “unconditional allegiance” and “permits no play with the context framing it, no play with its borders, no gradual and flexible transitions, no spontaneously creative stylizing variants on it. . . . One must either totally affirm it, or totally reject it” (p. 343). As my brief description indicates, authoritative discourse and internally persuasive discourse are polysemous and have (ongoing) dynamic dialogical relations with one another, pressuring, convincing, infusing, and at times coinciding and merging harmoniously with one another.

Since we are born into and inherit authoritative discourses, at least some of these discourses are experienced as internally persuasive even if unacknowledged. Here, the qualifier “internally persuasive” signifies a kind of unreflective embrace of authoritative discourse. However, when an individual actively in process of “ideological becoming” experiences an event or encounters a counterdiscourse compelling him or her to question the authoritative discourse, a gap between these two kinds of discourse occurs. As Bakhtin explains, “Consciousness awakens to independent ideological life precisely in a world of alien discourses

surrounding it, and from which it cannot initially separate itself; the process of distinguishing between one's own and another's discourse . . . is activated rather late in development" (p. 345).

Prior to an individual moving toward this more reflective mode of discourse discrimination and active appropriation, he or she first experiences a "separation between internally persuasive discourse and authoritarian enforced discourse" (p. 345). Because internally persuasive discourse is constituted from a cacophony of alien discourses, even when we shape a discourse of our own, that new discourse is of course never simply ours. Nonetheless, there is a productiveness and flexibility about internally persuasive discourse creating space for personal assimilation. It allows "new" words and discourses to emerge out of the discourses with which we are already familiar and within which we live; it manifests an openness, a dynamism fostering development and application "to new material, new conditions; it enters into interanimating relationships with new contexts. More than that, it enters into an intense interaction, a *struggle* with other internally persuasive discourses" (pp. 345–46). In fact, according to Bakhtin, "Ideological development is just such an intense struggle within us for hegemony among various available verbal and ideological points of view, approaches, directions and values" (p. 346).

Lastly, in contrast with the rigidity of authoritative discourse both in terms of content and surrounding or framing context, internally persuasive discourse promotes an improvisatory *ethos*. One can reharmonize its words by reorchestrating the framing context, extending its former boundaries, opening up its semantic fields, and developing its themes in conversation with contemporary concerns. The internally persuasive word is perpetually pregnant with "further creative life"; it continues as an unfinished symphony in which multiple composers and performers improvise on its themes, stretch its form, and refuse to allow a final note to sound. The essence of internally persuasive discourse is dynamic and inexhaustible, always yielding new insights as we "put it in a new situation in order to wrest new answers from it . . . and even wrest from it new words of its *own* (since another's discourse, if productive, gives birth to a new word from us in response)" (p. 346).

With Bakhtin's categories in mind, Sisco singles out the notion of literacy and its function within the hegemonic discourses of nineteenth-century proslavery America. When Mr. Auld terminated Douglass's reading lessons and provided his commentary on why the slave must remain illiterate, Douglass became aware, in a way he had not been previously, of the conjoint character of power and knowledge. At that "pre-literate

stage" (Sisco's term), Douglass internalized and began to assimilate the authoritative discourse of his masters and committed himself to the task of becoming literate in order to attain his freedom and to subvert the master/slave relationship. "Aware that Auld uses literacy as a means to assert superiority over his slaves, Douglass plans himself to change his own position among these binary oppositions by using literacy to assert power over his master" ("WSL," p. 197). As Douglass's narrative unfolds, part of what we see is not only his growth in literacy and education but also his, using Bakhtin's term, "ideological becoming," in which he struggles with authoritative discourses, assimilating them as internally persuasive discourses that take into account his distinctive experiences as a slave and a black other forced to live in white America.

Because slaves were denied the opportunity of formal education, and discussion about the topic was considered taboo, Douglass had to engage in creative resistance tactics in order to continue his studies. As we shall see, Douglass's understanding of and relation to literacy became increasingly complex. His determination to learn to read and write in the face of systemic sociopolitical, as well as local, opposition required innovative improvisatory maneuverings on his part. The drama he depicts of his struggle to accomplish his educational goals "reveals that literacy exists in many varying capacities in the rich interstices between and around freedom and enslavement, in marginal spaces free from such confining structures and ideologies" ("WSL," p. 199). For example, Douglass recounts how, at age twelve, when he was sent to do errands for his master, he always brought a book with him and a few extra pieces of bread. He would complete the errand as quickly as possible so that he might interact with the poor white boys playing in the streets. In exchange for bread, Douglass, as he puts it, "converted" the boys unknowingly "into teachers" (*NL*, p. 41). By engaging in these resistance tactics, Douglass was able to secure a reading lesson with every errand.

For his writing lessons, Douglass was equally creative. By observing how ship carpenters used a set of four letters to make certain parts of the ship, Douglass learned both the names of these letters and how to write them (p. 44). As Sisco observes, inscribed on the very wood of the ships themselves, "which both represent freedom and facilitate slavery, literacy is used by the shipbuilders for a purely utilitarian purpose"; however, Douglass is able to recontextualize this "functional use of literacy" and "to transform the shipyard into a scene of self-education and an act of political resistance" ("WSL," p. 202). Along similar lines, he received numerous "writing lessons" from white boys—playing on white boys'

desires for one-upmanship by challenging them to writing “duels.” In short, through his awareness of how “literacy, as a form of knowledge, signals a kind of mental superiority for whites over illiterate blacks” (p. 202), Douglass took advantage of this antagonism and created educational sites wherever he went. Describing his nontraditional classroom during that time, he writes, “My copy-book was the board fence, brick wall, and pavement; my pen and ink was a lump of chalk” (*NL*, p. 44).

Douglass’s basic writing lessons were finally completed when he was able to copy “the Italics in Webster’s Spelling Book” from memory. Making use whenever possible of little Master Thomas’s discarded copybooks, Douglass would occupy himself “writing in the spaces left in Master Thomas’s copy-book, copying what he had written” (p. 45). At last, over the course of seven years at the Aulds’, Douglass succeeded in reaching his goal of learning to read and write via his willful acts of “subterfuge, antagonism, direct imitation, and ultimately self-insertion in the margins of the ‘authoritative discourse’ of a southern ideology of literacy” (“WSL,” p. 201). Working within the racialized structures, authoritative discourses, and unjust practices of white southern society, “Douglass . . . emerges as a literate individual in the marginal spaces between the world sanctioned by slavery and an alternating space of his own making, free from its oppressive limitations” (p. 203).

Once he was able to read, Douglass experienced a double-sidedness to literacy given his sociopolitical context. On the one hand, after having read *The Columbian Orator*—which contains an account of a dialogue between a master and his slave in which the slave, through a series of arguments, ultimately convinces his master to emancipate him—Douglass was invigorated and encouraged.¹⁰ He says that this master/slave dialogue, as well as some additional speeches in the same work by a man named Sheridan on emancipation and human rights, enabled him to express more clearly ideas that he had possessed in a more inchoate form. Yet, on the other hand, though he was now able “to meet the arguments brought forward to sustain slavery,” the knowledge he gained heightened his discontent. Learning to read had, as Douglass puts it, felt at times like “a curse rather than a blessing. It had given me a view of my wretched condition, without the remedy. It opened my eyes to the horrible pit, but to no ladder upon which to get out” (*NL*, p. 42). Douglass, in other words, entered into a kind of existential angst, even at times wishing himself “a beast” in order to “get rid of thinking” (p. 42).

Now awakened via a heightened cognitive awareness of the multiple losses suffered through his enslavement, Douglass’s constrained world

tormented him in new ways. Everything around him manifested itself as freedom lost, freedom stolen, freedom as a dirge mocking him, repeating its mournful strains and reverberating melancholic melodies in the inner recesses his of soul. Douglass expresses this all-pervasive mood eloquently, employing images drawn from various sensory experiences.

Freedom now appeared, to disappear no more forever. It was heard in every sound, and seen in every thing. It was ever present to torment me with a sense of my wretched condition. I saw nothing without seeing it, I heard nothing without hearing it, and felt nothing without feeling it. It looked from every star, it smiled in every calm, breathed in every wind, and moved in every storm. I often found myself regretting my own existence, and wishing myself dead; and but for the hope of being free, I have no doubt but that I should have killed myself, or done something for which I should have been killed. (*NL*, p. 43)

Commenting on this passage, Sisco highlights Douglass's awareness of the paradoxes of literacy for the slave in an oppressive context. In such an environment, literacy exhibits a "capacity to simultaneously empower and imprison, to 'bless' and to 'curse'" ("WSL," p. 199). Douglass's literacy and the newly acquired facility to mount well-reasoned arguments against the immorality of slavery were not enough to liberate him from the reality of slavery. Although literacy opened up new worlds for Douglass and remained a highly valued achievement, Douglass came to see its limitations—for the black other in white antebellum America, the achievement of literacy translated at most into a partial liberation.

As we have seen, in his struggle to become an educated person, Douglass came to understand the heteroglossia of such words as "literacy," "freedom," "enslavement," and the like. When these words are woven together to form the authoritative discourses of proslavery advocates, they stifle, oppress, and seek to keep Douglass bound and dehumanized. However, when they are reharmonized and infused with new meanings via Douglass's appropriations, they provide him with some breathing room, opening a liminal space in which he can gain a foothold and begin to resist and reconfigure the sociocultural narrative scripting him as subhuman, essentially instrumental, and socially dead. Douglass's resistance to the dominant discourses of his day and his ability to enter into and reshape the heteroglossia of his world strengthen and corroborate Foucault's account of the correlativity of power and resistance. Although Douglass's field of possibilities was severely constricted,

he was able to exercise his volitional and rational capacities in order to reshape his destiny. He learned not only how to survive in the midst of a “dialogically agitated and tension-filled environment of alien words, value judgments and accents” (*DI*, p. 276), but he learned to take those very same “alien words” and improvise new melodies in the silent (white) spaces between the already written (black) notes. This is not, however, to suggest that Douglass’s improvisations were entirely new creations. After all, as Sisco observes, while Douglass’s journey to literacy involved acts of resistance, nonetheless the process of defining and shaping his own voice was always vis-à-vis the white other. That is, in the very act in which “Douglass opposes Auld, he is also copying his young master’s hand, imitating his style. . . . Douglass’s handwriting, the unique mark of literacy, always bears the trace of his unwitting teachers and enslavers” (“WSL,” p. 204).

Returning to Douglass’s *Narrative* and acknowledging the literary and discursive complexities discussed via Sisco and Sekora, in the appendix Douglass’s voice emerges in a subverting act *through* and by means of reappropriating the dominant discourses of the day. As Sekora notes, Douglass had become increasingly frustrated with his white abolitionist counterparts and “came eventually to distrust all of these constraints upon black expression.”¹¹ Breaking out of the set form, Douglass reserves the appendix for himself. There he states explicitly that his disparaging comments about religion “apply to the slaveholding religion of this land, and with no possible reference to Christianity proper” (*NL*, p. 97). Crafting carefully his condemnatory remarks, he first sets “the Christianity of this land” in opposition to “the Christianity of Christ,” describing the former as “bad, corrupt, and wicked” and the latter as “good, pure, and holy.” To call the religion of America “Christianity” is, according to Douglass, “the climax of all misnomers,” and the “boldest of all frauds.” As he dwells upon the “hypocritical Christianity of this land” with its “religious pomp and show,” he is overcome with contempt and disgust (p. 97).

Next, having developed his themes and set forth his contrasting, opposing voices, Douglass begins a movement composed of line after dissonant line detailing the inconsistencies of America’s so-called “Christianity.” For example, Douglass highlights the violence in which these “ministers” and “missionaries” engage. “The man who wields the blood-clotted cowskin during the week fills the pulpit on Sunday, and claims to be a minister of the meek and lowly Jesus” (p. 97). This same man robs, rapes, and ravishes black families; in one breath, he denies

slaves the right to be educated and then “proclaims it a religious duty to read the Bible” (p. 97).

With these examples, we see Douglass take up scriptural language and images, whose meanings had been distorted for exploitative purposes, and he infuses them with new meanings having direct bearing on his present situation. Douglass’s creative rescripting of his own identity and his reclaiming of the Christian narrative for emancipatory and denunciatory “prophetic” purposes are variants of Foucault’s “reverse discourse.” As Foucault explains in volume one of *History of Sexuality*, in reverse discourse one utilizes the “discursive elements”—that is, common phrases, terms, metaphors, and so forth—of the dominant discourse in order to undermine that discourse and to open a space for new subjectivities to emerge, or as Foucault would say, for becoming otherwise than we are.¹² Here it is important to stress that, according to Foucault, reverse or counterhegemonic discourse is not merely reactionary; it, like the dominant discourse, is productive. In other words, social realities—in particular, social identities—are created, shaped, and solidified by means of this discursive activity.

Given Douglass’s context, in which a particular inflection of American Christianity had developed its own authoritative discourses in order to justify slavery, he was able to use discursive elements of the master narratives to create a powerful counterhegemonic discourse allowing him both to assert his humanity and to resist and reconfigure the subjective scriptings imposed by the white other. In short, Douglass worked *within* the power relations and mechanisms of an oppressive slave society, and his acts of resistance proved successful on multiple counts. Douglass’s narrative helps us to see concretely and feel dramatically Foucault’s emphasis on the productive, rather than merely oppressive, dimensions of power relations. Likewise, the often grim picture associated with Foucault’s conclusion—that there is no outside to power—is given, by way of Douglass’s account of his struggle for emancipation, a brighter hue. If power and resistance are correlative, then the all-pervasiveness of power relations necessarily means the all-pervasiveness of resistance possibilities, and thus the hope that we might become, like Douglass, other than what we are.

1. This phrase comes from John Winthrop's 1630 sermon, "A Model of Christian Charity."
2. For an interesting discussion on this topic, see Henry Louis Gates Jr., "Frederick Douglass and the Language of the Self," in *Figures in Black: Words, Signs, and the "Racial" Self* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1987), pp. 98–125.
3. Frederick Douglass, *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass*, in *Autobiographies: Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, an American Slave/My Bondage and My Freedom/Life and Times of Frederick Douglass*, ed. Henry Louis Gates (New York: Library of America, 1994), p. 15; hereafter abbreviated *NL*.
4. For specific historical examples underscoring the absurdity of the antebellum American legal system whose laws simultaneously treated slaves as things and as human beings, see Leonard Cassuto, "Frederick Douglass and the Work of Freedom: Hegel's Master-Slave Dialectic in the Fugitive Slave Narrative," *Prospects: An Annual Journal of American Cultural Studies* 21 (1996): 229–59, esp. 230–31.
5. J. Kameron Carter, "Race, Religion, and the Contradictions of Identity: A Theological Engagement with Douglass's 1845 *Narrative*," *Modern Theology* 21 (2005): 37–65.
6. See John Sekora, "Black Message/White Envelope: Genre, Authenticity, and Authority in the Antebellum Slave Narrative," *Callaloo* 32 (1987): 482–515, esp. 482–91; hereafter abbreviated "BM/WE."
7. Given the racialized context of Douglass's day, there is a sense in which white authentication of black narratives was necessary, as the social consciousness had been shaped to see blacks as inferior. Nonetheless, Douglass's narrative suggests that even abolitionists like Garrison continued to micromanage the former's discourse in ways that reinforced whiteness as the norm for all things intellectual and moral. For other examples of Garrison's "white authentication" of Douglass's text, see also *NL*, p. 7.
8. Lisa Sisco, "'Writing in the Spaces Left': Literacy as a Process of Becoming in the Narratives of Frederick Douglass," *American Transcendental Quarterly* 9 (1995): 195–227, esp. 196; hereafter abbreviated "WSL."
9. Mikhail Mikhailovich Bakhtin, *The Dialogic Imagination: Four Essays by M. M. Bakhtin*, ed. Michael Holquist, trans. Caryl Emerson and Michael Holquist (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1981), p. 341; hereafter abbreviated *DI*.
10. *The Columbian Orator* was a widely disseminated textbook in American classrooms of the nineteenth century. For a detailed study of its history, see David W. Blight, ed., *The Columbian Orator* (New York: New York University Press, 1998).
11. John Sekora, "The Dilemma of Frederick Douglass: The Slave Narrative as Literary Institution," *Essays in Literature* 10 (1983): 223.
12. Michel Foucault, *History of Sexuality*, vol. 1, *An Introduction*, trans. Robert Hurley (New York: Vintage, 1990), p. 100.