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**Foucault and Slavery: Violence, Power and  
Resistance in Slave Narratives**

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## Abstract

Much recent literature on slavery implicitly conceives power as zero-sum coercion of one rational unitary subject by another, emphasizing violence while failing to investigate resistance. To address this, this paper considers Michel Foucault, whose works challenge such understandings of power and the subject. Foucault distinguishes “power” (an exercised relation closely linked to resistance) from “violence” (a relationship without possibility of resistance). The paper suggests Foucault’s theories are indeed useful, though not unproblematic: he himself used “slavery” rhetorically to exemplify the difference between “violence” and “power” without investigating how slavery actually functioned, potentially replicating the resistance-masking gesture that prompted the paper’s initial turn to Foucault.

Foucault’s theories are introduced, and a case made for the theoretical relevance of slavery. The paper then conducts an empirical enquiry into “violence”, “power” and “resistance” in antebellum slavery using the autobiographical narratives of Frederick Douglass. It is argued that slavery involved “violence” *and* “power”, with many forms of resistance. Power and violence are discussed using Foucault’s analyses of sovereignty and discipline, with consequences for his thesis of a shift from a regime of sovereignty to one of discipline.

Considering Elaine Scarry and Judith Butler alongside Foucault, the paper then argues for understanding self-creation as a performative process of resistance to violence, made possible through gaps in power. This leads to a discussion of *the narratives themselves* as a form of resistance, which is then extended through a brief reading of Homi Bhabha’s *DissemiNation* to suggest Douglass’s narratives not only narrated *his* life, but can also be seen in performative terms as ‘narrating the nation’. The paper suggests certain findings may be pertinent to contemporary slavery, but highlights certain aspects of resistance that were historically specific. Throughout, it is argued that Foucault’s work is fruitful for this and further study of slavery.

Dedicated to my Mother and Father, Elizabeth and David Slack,  
without whom I could not have even begun, let alone finished, this course

and to

Jenny Edkins and Rita Abrahamsen, without whom I might not have completed it  
and would certainly have enjoyed it less

**Thank You**

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## **Introduction**

There are 27 million slaves worldwide today—more than ever before (Bales, 2004: 8)—yet slavery remains under-researched, and research confined to few perspectives. Contemporary slavery literature (for example Bales, 2000; 2004; 2005; 2007; McGill, 2003; van den Anker, 2004; Batstone, 2007) tends to employ journalistic or mainstream sociological approaches (Chowdhry, 2004 is a rare—postcolonialist—exception). Major modern slavery literature (particularly Bales, 2004) typically approaches power either as economically derived or as pure violent coercion of—and by—unitary subjects who pre-exist their relations, assumptions I sought to question.

Inspired by his influence on postcolonial studies of domination, I turned to Foucault for a relational view of power that emphasizes resistance, only to discover he himself apparently dismisses slavery as coercion, yet without his trademark historical detail.

This dissertation seeks not to dismiss other theories of power, rather to explore *Foucauldian* views: what can a broadly Foucauldian understanding of power, violence, and resistance bring to the study of slavery? Conversely, this implies that

slavery can inform thinking about Foucault's concepts, as argued in Chapter 1. Foucault's vast theoretical range and methodological implications cannot be *comprehensively* addressed in a short project: I have not employed genealogical or archaeological methodologies, rather I have sought to explore a particular snapshot of slavery through specific Foucauldian *concepts*—power, violence, resistance—and vice-versa.

Exploring micro-level power requires more detail on individual lives than is available in contemporary slave literature. Present-day slaves' own *detailed* accounts are extremely rare (though see Cox and Marks, 2006), and their own analyses rarer. Ethical and practical difficulties interviewing slaves necessitated deferring *contemporary* slavery to my PhD. This dissertation therefore addresses antebellum slavery using older, far more detailed, primary sources. Literature on antebellum slavery is far more theoretically varied, though I have not encountered this exact enquiry in that literature either. Results cannot be easily generalised to contemporary slavery, which differs in respect of ownership and racism (Bales, 2004: 10-11, 24-26), but many of these mechanisms of power depend on neither: the study demonstrates these theories are fruitful enough for further consideration and provides a previously unexplored basis for future comparison with contemporary forms of slavery.

To understand power, Foucault suggests starting with resistance (Foucault, 2000f: 329). This means not masking slaves' voices, instead taking seriously their own unique experiences and analyses of violence, power and resistance. This, then, is a first foray into the theoretical issues using the well-known, detailed and reflective

narratives of Frederick Douglass, who escaped antebellum slavery and rose to political office.

There are, potentially, many “Foucaults”, particularly given his own problematizations of authorial consistency (Foucault, 1977c; 1988: 14 cited Mills 2003: 3; Dumm, 1996: xxi-xxiii). Foucault offers his books as “a kind of tool box which others can rummage through” (Foucault 1994: 523-524 quoted in O’Farrell 2005: 50) for tools to be *used*, rather than to constrain (Foucault, Mills, 2003: 7; Prozorov, 2007: 15). Chapter 1 offers a reading of Foucault, outlines his influential thinking about power and resistance, and problematizes their separation from *violence*, making the case for the empirical enquiry pursued in chapter 2. Chapter 2 utilises Douglass’s autobiographies to investigate the *functioning* of violence and power in—and resistances to—slavery. Chapter 3 further discusses resistance, considering narration itself as performative resistance.

This dissertation suggests violence is indeed important, though it may function somewhat differently than pure coercion, and is crucially interlinked with power. Resistance, which the “coercion” view masks, proves both possible and widespread. Before this can be demonstrated, Chapter 1 will introduce the relevant concepts.



# 1

## **Power, Violence, Resistance and “Slavery” in Foucault**

This chapter introduces key terms in Foucault’s work, outlining his conception of power before discussing the conceptual separation of power and violence, and his use of “slavery” as exemplary of that separation. I suggest the latter move is problematic, necessitating an empirical enquiry into how power, violence and resistance interact in slavery, to be pursued in the next chapter. To prepare for that enquiry, I outline Foucault’s analyses of sovereign and disciplinary regimes of power, before noting some criticisms and useful refinements of Foucault.

Foucault’s understanding of “power” is set against a traditional notion of zero-sum coercion of one rational agent by another, which he connects with a juridical-economic model of power-as-right, which may be exchanged, given up, moved around as a commodity dispersed in a top-down or centre-outward fashion (Foucault, 1980b: 198; Foucault, 2004: 13). For Foucault, power is irreducible to law or right (Foucault, 1998: 89), and is neither substance (Foucault, 2000d: 324), possession, nor exchangeable commodity (Foucault, 1998: 94; Foucault, 2004: 14): “Power, in

the substantive sense, '*le pouvoir*, doesn't exist.'" (Foucault, 1980b: 198) Rather, power is relational, existing only insofar as it is exercised (Sheridan, 1980: 139; Foucault, 2000f: 337). It is produced in action—not directly on the other individual but on their conduct (Foucault, 2000d: 324; Foucault, 2000f: 340)—from moment-to-moment and point-to-point (Foucault, 1998: 93) as part of a complex all-pervading web of "micro-powers" that extends horizontally as well as vertically (Sheridan, 1980: 139). Foucault understands power as a complex network of shifting relations in which "[p]ower is everywhere; not because it embraces everything, but because it comes from everywhere." (Foucault, 1998: 93) Power, therefore, should not be analysed *from* a central point from which other forms *derive*, rather "it is the moving substrate of force relations which, by virtue of their inequality, constantly engender states of power, but the latter are always local and unstable" (Foucault, 1998: 93). *Relatively* stable effects or 'major dominations' (Foucault, 1998: 94) may occur through repetitious concatenation of groups of relations: the mistake is to assume that these accretions of effects, even when ossified into a "state of domination" (Foucault, 2000b: 283), are immutable causal principles rather than hegemonic effects.

One implication is that there is no *ontic* outside to power relations (though Foucault may be read as suggesting an *ontological* exteriority—a constitutive outside—to his 'diagrams' of power relations – see Prozorov, 2007: 18). Against a tradition of political thought enunciated within/as the desire to escape from politics (Dumm, 1996: 1-2), this understanding of power permits no such exodus. Resistance consists not in the final overthrow of power, but in localised (Sheridan, 1980: 139) attempts to reconfigure power relations so as to minimise domination (Dumm, 1996: 141). All

power relations are not equally tolerable, and overthrowing institutions may be desirable and achievable, but it does not bring one outside power.

Foucault (1980d: 119-120; 2004: 40) rejects the general equation (though not *all* specific linkages (Foucault, 1998: 12)) of power with repression: power generally works neither by *repressing* the natural or essential, nor by distorting pre-existing individual subjects. Rather, for Foucault power ceaselessly *produces* the appearance of the natural, constructs bodies (Butler, 1989: 601), and “produces reality, [...] domains of objects and rituals of truth”, such that “[t]he individual and the knowledge that may be gained of him belong to this production.” (Foucault, 1977a: 194) Even—indeed, especially—in perhaps its most intuitively ‘reasonable’ location—“sexuality”—Foucault denied the ‘repressive hypothesis’. Far from repressing “sexuality”, the Victorian era incited it to speak ever more voluminously and ceaselessly in countless new discourses, *producing* its objects (“sex”/“sexuality”) and multitudinous perversions (Foucault, 1998: 48). This is among Foucault’s many demonstrations of how power operates through the production and promotion of both objects of knowledge and specific subjectivities—through specific forms of subjectification (here used equivalently with subjectivation, both being translations of Foucault’s *assujettissement*)—here producing a particular, confessing, subject (Foucault, 1998: 59). We have come to see this *power-induced* endless speaking about sex as liberation *from power* (Foucault, 1998: 7, 159), hence Foucault’s suspicion of “liberation”.

The example of “sexuality” also shows the mutual imbrication of power and knowledge, central to power’s productivity. Against the age-old notion that power and

truth are separable or opposed, Foucault insists power produces knowledge, whilst knowledge simultaneously presupposes and constitutes power relations (Foucault, 1977a: 27; 1980a: 59; 1980d: 131-133): power relations “can neither be established nor function unless a true discourse is produced, accumulated, put into circulation, and set to work” (Foucault, 2004: 24). “Discourse”, here, is to be understood as distinct from language, as a complex set of material practices and anonymous regularities structuring the domain of statements that count as true (Mills, 2003: 55) or intelligible, as well as referring to actual bodies of statements. Different discourses may interact, variously supporting or undermining one another, competing to redefine the objects they constitute, with profound political implications that do not necessarily favour dominance. Whilst “discourse” helps to theorise the persistence and regularity of power relations, it is ‘tactically polyvalent’, which is to say it may be used for competing ends, or combined in incompatible ways (Foucault, 1998: 100-102): in short, there are always immanent possibilities for resistance; power is never final, it is always a *repetitious effect* (Foucault, 1998: 93). This repetitiousness is central to Butler’s “performativity”, which builds on Foucault’s assertion that the subject is a form (Foucault, 2000b: 290), and will be discussed in greater detail in Chapter 3. Briefly, power manifests locally not because it trickles down, but because local manifestations *are* the repeated performance of power. For example, the distinction—and, hence relations—between masters and slaves appears at state/society level, in law, itself supporting the local relations, but it is exercised in/through local level performances. That power must be *performed* implies possibilities for unconscious failure to perform roles, and for conscious resistances that build on the knowledge that it is locally vulnerable, important in chapter 2.

This production of subjects is so indissociable from power that Foucault claims his work is not principally a theory of *power*, but “a history of the different modes by which [...] human beings are made subjects” (Foucault, 2000f: 326-327). In overlapping phases he studied ‘scientific’ modes whereby “man” among other objects becomes knowable (Foucault, 2002a; 2002b), practices dividing the subject within himself or from others (Foucault, 1977a; 2001), and “the way a human turns him- or herself into a subject” (for example Foucault, 1998; 2000b, though aspects of discipline may be similarly understood).

### **“Slavery” and the Separation of Power and Violence**

Before discussing specific regimes of power, it is necessary to clarify Foucault’s terminological distinction between “power” and “violence”, and the relevance of “slavery”.

The potential for resistance is the *sine qua non* of power for Foucault: “where there is power, there is resistance” (Foucault, 1998: 95). Without resistance, there is a ‘relationship of violence’. Foucault persistently uses “slavery” as, depending how one reads him, either his example of a ‘relationship of violence’ or as a point where “power” and “violence” segue into one another.

Foucault states, “Where the determining factors are exhaustive, there is no relationship of power: slavery is not a power relationship when a man is in chains, only when he has some possible mobility, even a chance of escape.” (Foucault, 2000f: 342). The qualification here may be read strictly as implying that some slavery

is a power relation (i.e. when a body is *not* in chains but still enslaved). However, Foucault never supplied any details of “slavery”—one can read “in chains” as a metaphorical and rhetorical substitute for such detail—and elsewhere he more explicitly characterized slavery as violence (1977a: 137), differentiating “discipline” from the “costly and violent relation” of slavery based on the appropriation of bodies.

Slaves’ positions *are* deeply polarised and their bodies are appropriated, *however* they may often *not* be literally chained or *absolutely* determined and appropriation must be maintained; as such there are possibilities of, and hopes for mobility and escape. Such moments of absolutely determining violence may well be a necessary feature of slavery but I want to explore whether they are sufficient. Foucault (2000f: 340) notes “power” and “violence” may coexist—they are not mutually exclusive—however, the analytical separation itself raises the logical and empirical questions of how they interact. The use of slavery as an example may be fruitful if studied in detail, however when glossed over briefly or used metaphorically or rhetorically it may have unfortunate effects: Mills (2003: 40), quoting this same section from Foucault, takes it to show “the relationship between those in struggles over power is *not simply reducible to a master-slave relation*” (my emphasis). Here, therefore, “master-slave relation” implies pure violence without resistance, a characterization I dispute in Chapter 2. Mills cautions that in theorising the interlinkage of resistance and power, one should not reduce or hide the agency of those who do resist (2003: 40), yet using “slavery” in this fashion has precisely that effect. The point is not to castigate Mills (who then, contradictorily, briefly discusses slave resistance (Mills, 2003: 41) but to highlight Foucault’s problematic formulation.

Another interview offers implicit clarification: “power relations are possible only insofar as the subjects are free. If one of them were completely at the other’s disposal and became his thing, an object on which he could wreak boundless and limitless violence, there wouldn’t be any relations of power. Even [...] when it can truly be claimed that one side has “total power” over the other, a power can be exercised over the other only insofar as the other still has the option of killing himself, of leaping out the window, or of killing the other person [...] if there were no possibility of resistance (of violent resistance, flight, deception, strategies capable of reversing the situation), there would be no power relations at all.” (Foucault, 2000b: 292) This statement clarifies the identification of “power relations”, however resistance is so widely conceived that we must wonder what might qualify as a “relation of violence”? Though unnamed, slavery again functions implicitly as the example – a relation in which one is another’s ‘thing’. However, *did* masters exercise “*boundless and limitless* violence”? If so, this would seem to be “a relationship of violence” in Foucault’s terms. Otherwise, we must—as chapter 2 argues—allow that slavery consists, at least in part, of *power* relations.

What about the requirement that “subjects are free”? On the face of it, little could be more obvious than that a slave is not ‘free’, but (without disputing slavery’s horrors) in Foucault’s sense they are not entirely *unfree*. Theorising ‘Foucauldian’ freedom is, unfortunately, a dissertation in itself. Here it must suffice to define the freedom that is the condition of power minimally as “a field of possibilities in which several kinds of conduct, several ways of reacting and modes of behaviour are available” (Foucault, 2000f: 342 quoted in Edkins and Pin-Fat, 2005: 5). As such, it is distinct from *liberation*, and from ‘concrete freedom’ (see Dumm, 1996; Prozorov, 2007).

In the same interview Foucault introduces a further terminological gradation: *states of domination* “in which the power relations, instead of being mobile, allowing the various participants to adopt strategies modifying them, remain blocked, frozen.” (Foucault, 2000b: 283) Chapter 2 considers slavery as a “state of domination”, effectively a productive borderline case between relatively fixed “power” and “violence”.

Although power is, by definition, ever shifting, Foucault identifies regimes of historically characteristic modalities of power, though these are neither mutually exclusive nor radically separable (Foucault, 2000c: 219). While he is famous for his later works on the regime of “governmentality” and biopower/biopolitics, these presuppose greater freedoms and are less helpful here, therefore I focus on his earlier analyses of regimes of “sovereignty” and “discipline”.

### Sovereignty

“Sovereignty” has multiple meanings, related through the figure of the sovereign. It may refer to the classical conception of sovereignty described in Foucault (1998: 135-159) as the right (and practice) of the sovereign to *kill with impunity* or *let live*, distinct from ‘biopower’, which actively *fosters* or ‘disallows’ life (Foucault, 1998: 138; Dean, 1999: 139). Secondly, sovereignty may refer in Schmittian terms to the exception, the right (more accurately the unfounded/unfoundable decisionistic *practice*) of founding law or deciding exception to it (Prozorov, 2007: 87). Thirdly it may refer to the modality of power relations typical to the regime of sovereignty. Though all three have some relevance to slaves, here I focus on Foucault’s analysis of



punishment in regimes of sovereignty. He focuses on public execution, as part of a range of punishments based on public pain, analysed in terms of a political technology of the body that subsequently changes with the inception of disciplinary society. The characteristic functioning and failures of the exercise of sovereign power through *spectacle*, and its implications for resistance, as analysed in Foucault (1977a: 3-69) can, as Chapter 2 will show, serve as a model for certain aspects of master-slave power relations.

The exercise of sovereign power is discontinuous and episodic (Foucault, 1977a: 88, 130; Foucault, 1980d: 119). Its display must be spectacular: *severity* of punishment must deter crime, whereas discipline relies on *certainty* of punishment (Foucault, 1977a: 9). In this sense, the ‘expenditure’ of sovereign power is ‘costly’—it must be excessive and extreme—hence the inventive tortures accompanying execution. Torture also functioned to produce and arithmetically guarantee truth (Foucault, 1977a: 35-39). This is not the point at which power goes out-of-control, it is central to power’s normal functioning: “torture is a technique; it is not an extreme expression of lawless rage” (Foucault, 1977a: 33). It functions in a detailed and calculated economy of pain, in which the body of the condemned functions as a sign to the populace: it was “a policy of terror: to make everyone aware, through the body of the criminal, of the unrestrained presence of the sovereign. The public execution did not re-establish justice; it *reactivated power*.” (Foucault, 1977a: 49, my emphasis).

Whilst this is a *relationship of violence* between sovereign and victim, that relationship of violence is an *element in a relation of power* between sovereign and populace. As a relation of power, there is the potential for resistance, for failure of the

exercise. The role of the crowd is “internal to the public execution itself: at once an element of its functioning and the principle of its perpetual disorder.” (Foucault, 1977a: 57). The crowd must witness, must *see for itself* in order to feel the necessary fear, but the risk is that it may revolt (Foucault, 1977a: 58-59, 73). Revolt may be anything from feeling sympathy for the criminal or becoming accustomed to the violence from which they are supposed to be deterred, to failing to play (or exceeding) their role at the pillory, to all-out rebellion to free the criminal and attack the executioner (Foucault, 1977a: 59-63). The moment sovereign power determines to display itself fully becomes the very moment when it reaches its limits and proves its own vulnerability. The crowd’s function is to render itself governable, to take up and ‘cite’ the sovereign’s power, but this very scenario produces the opportunity and reveals the possibility for it to refuse/fail.

### **Discipline**

The regime of “discipline” eschews sovereignty’s spectacular, episodic but unreliable displays of power in favour of a meticulous, calculated, continually functioning, subtle and economical regime of micro-coercions that seek to encompass everything and become so internalised as to become self-disciplining-self (Foucault, 1977a: 202-203). The word “internalised” here should not be taken to imply a radical internality of a pre-existing subject, rather it conveys something of the process by which a particular kind of individual subject becomes possible in the disciplinary regime, and the production of that subject and delimitation of its ‘internal’ domain is at once an operation of power. Whereas in sovereignty the body-in-pain as sign was crucial, in discipline the body is that which is to be trained, rendered in a relation of *docility-*

*utility* (Foucault, 1977a: 137). In punishment, the body is that which must be gotten beyond for a higher purpose (Foucault, 1977a: 11): the ‘internal’ *soul* becomes a principle of intelligibility, thus becoming the object of regulation that is *not* the body but is inscribed upon it, hence “the soul is the prison of the body” (Foucault, 1977a: 29-30; Butler, 1989: 606).

It is principally the *mechanics* of discipline that interest me here. The exemplary figure of discipline is the architectural device of Bentham’s panopticon (Foucault, 1977a: 200), which functions through the disciplinary gaze by means of surveillance (‘discipline’ being the chosen English translation of *surveiller*). The panopticon functions by placing bodies into a space that is ordered and ostensibly perfectly surveilled: a circular building with cells lit by outside light renders each ‘inmate’ visible to the occupant of a permanently visible central observation tower whose occupancy is rendered *unverifiable* by the architecture. Simultaneously, inmates are effectively separated from, and prevented from communicating freely with, one another. Any misdemeanour may be observed and punished. Crucially the inmates have no way of knowing whether or not they actually are being watched; they are incited to ‘watch’ themselves *at all times* (Foucault, 1977a: 201). This insidious operation is backed by the potential for violence but its genius is in rendering that violence unnecessary: it is, in itself, a *power relation* that requires and enlists the individual in his/her own subjection. *In principle* it may fail/be resisted, though it is designed to minimise that likelihood: “to induce in the inmate a state of conscious and permanent visibility that assures the automatic functioning of power. So to arrange things that *the surveillance is permanent in its effects, even if it is discontinuous in its action; that the perfection of power should tend to render its actual exercise*

*unnecessary* [...] the inmates should be caught up in a power situation *of which they are themselves the bearers.*” (Foucault, 1977a: 201, my emphases) The panopticon also constitutes the figure at its centre: they are not the pre-existing source or principle of power, rather they too are an effect (Foucault, 1980c: 157-159).

Foucault’s thesis is that the West (including nineteenth-century U.S.A. (Foucault, 1977a: 15)) has, through a variety of discursive and epistemological shifts and in response to the problems of punishment in the regime of sovereignty, moved increasingly toward a disciplinary regime (Foucault, 1977a; 1980d: 119). This marks not humanization of punishment but a shift in the political anatomy of the body – bodies are ‘broken down’ into constituent parts and rearranged according to new political functioning (Foucault, 1977a: 138-139). Panopticism functions alongside an explosion of *dressage* techniques for coercing and training the body through microscopically observed exercises. The habitual demeanour of the body, its positions, its aptitudes, desires and so on must all be regulated to produce “docile bodies” whose aptitudes are to be maximised but tamed (Foucault, 1977a: 138). Construction of bodies does not deny the materiality of the body, but suggests there is no moment at which the body is not always-already political, always-already inserted into power relations, knowable – and its *extra-discursive* materiality ironically only delimitable – *through discourse* (Butler, 1989: 601; 1993: 10-11). Though “discipline” *may* have conscious programmers (such as prison reformers), power for Foucault is intentional and non-subjective, preceding any given subject and exceeding programmatic intentions (Foucault, 1998: 94-95; Dean, 1999: 22, 72), and exerting regular pressures and effects. For example, gender may be considered a dispersed

disciplinary regime in which “the disciplinarian is everyone and yet no one in particular.” (Bartky, 1988: 70 quoted in Mills, 2003: 94).

### **Criticisms and Refinements of Foucault**

Foucault has been accused of rendering substantive resistance impossible or unthinkable (Phillips, 2002: 330) through his insistence on construction, denial of an ‘outside’ to power relations, and simultaneous insistence that resistance is always part of power relations. However, that resistance is ‘part of’ a power relation does not imply subservience to power. Foucault in fact suggests resistance is both *more* frequent and *more* possible than we often imagine (Mills, 2003: 40). As we have seen, Foucault *is* sceptical of projects of liberation, suggesting these have too often perversely *intensified* power’s hold on us (Dumm, 1996: 2). However he affirms that liberation struggles not only “have their place” but may be a *necessary* condition for the “practices of freedom” he increasingly studied, however they are insufficient in themselves (Foucault, 2000b: 282-283). “Liberation” may be considered like “solutions” in general: not ‘bad’ but ‘dangerous’ such that “we always have something to do” (Foucault, 2000e: 256). It is always liberation *from* a particular set of power relations, violence or state of domination and *to another set of power relations*. Major shifts in domination are rare, but not impossible, and Foucault’s point is that everything is not fixed in the meantime: we are not doomed to passivity (Mills, 2003: 40). Changeability is built into the very idea that power is not a substance, but a process; moreover, while there is no outside to power relations Foucault’s genealogical and archaeological methods are concerned with uncovering the contingencies of (hence *challenging*) our *present position* (Dumm, 1996: 22).

Others criticise Foucault's non-interpretive stance (Mills, 2003: 41) and normative reluctance, though those who demand normative prescription perhaps fail to appreciate its perpetual dangers (Prozorov, 2007: 12). Reticence about grand prescription is consistent with Foucault's identification of "the indignity of speaking for others" (Foucault and Deleuze, 1977: 209) and position on 'specific intellectuals' (Foucault, 1980d: 128-130). Nonetheless, Foucault's own activism and his choice of objects of study should undermine accusations of quietism (Mills, 2003: 41), as might the prolific anti-conservative use of his works in postcolonialism and feminism, in spite of his (or his works') androcentrism (McNay, 1992: 195; Mills, 2003: 7) and eurocentrism (Said, 1994: 47).

Decentering subjects perhaps risks disqualifying the subject at the very moment previously-excluded groups seek to mobilise it against dominant subjects (Hartsock, 1987: 160 cited in Loomba, 2005: 206), however many Foucauldian positions suggest not the abandonment or destitution of the subject (though see Prozorov, 2007) but its interrogation. Butler, for example, produces a theory building upon Foucault's understanding of power, demonstrating how the *effect* of the subject appears, *how* it is significant, not that it is *insignificant*, suggesting a revised notion of agency discussed in chapter 3.

Scott (1990) broadly accepts Foucault's ideas but suggests that the analysis of power relations is impaired by failure to emphasize that each 'side' has roles (Scott, 1990: xii), such that observed relations are only part of the picture. Observed performances of power and resistance may be tactics, thus Scott introduces the notion of 'hidden transcripts'—used in chapter 2—i.e. those actions, opinions, and utterances

which *cannot* be spoken to the other party but which may be avowed in the presence of coequals, which occasionally irrupt into ‘public’ view.

Chapter 2 argues the thesis of a shift from sovereign power to discipline is problematic with regard to slavery, and that panoptic surveillance may support an otherwise *sovereign* regime, decoupled from other aspects of discipline. Power and violence coexist, but their analytical separation, and the refinements introduced above elucidate their function and the possibilities for resistance.

# 2

## **Power, Violence and Resistance in the Narratives of Frederick Douglass**

This chapter considers Frederick Douglass’s experiences of slavery in light of theoretical and empirical concerns outlined in Chapter 1, seeking to understand the interaction of power and violence, and outline possibilities for resistance with reference to Douglass’s autobiographies, which at 1292 pages provide unusually detailed and analytical first-hand accounts of slavery.

Frederick Douglass was born c.1818 in Tuckahoe, Maryland. Aged 8, his master gave him to relatives in Baltimore, a less violent environment than the plantation. Here, through various ruses, he learned to read and write. Returned to Tuckahoe in 1832, his master thought him “spoiled” and him sent to Covey—the negro-breaker—for one year. Six months in, considering himself ‘broken’ and fit only for slavery he unexpectedly and successfully fought Covey, fortunately escaping punishment for this capital offense – a turning point in his fortunes. After periods with kinder masters, he



was caught prior to attempting escape. With the case unproven, amidst murderous sentiment from other slaveholders, his master returned him to Baltimore where he further progressed in literacy and faith before successfully escaping Northward in 1838, becoming a leading abolitionist from 1841. Among the most prominent black US statesmen, he died in 1895. (Douglass, 1893; 1969; 1995)

Given limited space, this does not claim to be comprehensive or fully representative—it is an exploration of one case—however, while the focus is on Douglass my research has in fact been broader. Many of the key points raised are far from unique. Sovereign killing and torture feature widely in slave accounts (e.g. Bruner, 1845: 42; Jacobs, 1853; Jackson, 1862: 23), as do surveillance (see Parenti, 2003: 13-32), contested interpretations of Christianity (Brown, 1849: 136; 1880: 15-16), and everyday forms of resistance such as mockery, singing and ‘hidden transcripts’ (Scott, 1990: 4, 139).

The chapter considers Foucault’s models of “sovereign power” and “discipline”, suggesting the former is broadly useful, while surveillance may be decoupled from Foucault’s broader thesis on “discipline”. Next, it outlines some key forms of slave resistance. Finally, it discusses Foucault’s distinction between “violence” and “power”, suggesting that in this state of domination violence *does* play a fundamental role (more complex than pure coercion), however there are indeed *power relations* and resistance (though the difficulty of resistance should not be underestimated).

## **“Sovereignty”: the Duality of Violence and Power**

This section considers Foucault’s analysis (1977a: 32-69) of the *spectacle* and witnesses under the regime of sovereignty (outlined in chapter 1). I suggest the principal relationship of master and slaves is one of ‘micro-sovereignty’, i.e. a localised *de facto* sovereignty in which killing functions analogously to Foucault’s account, while torture functions similarly, but additionally desubjectifies. I argue these are both ‘violence’ *and* ‘power’, depending on target. I do not attempt to locate the slaveholder within the history of classical sovereignty, rather I contend that *as a modality of power relations* this forms a useful *model*: we can think of the slaveholder as a ‘micro-sovereign’ in this limited sense.

### **Murder**

Murder of slaves by white slaveholders is a recurrent actuality and ever-present possibility in Douglass’s account. A slave named Demby broke free while being whipped for some minor infraction, ran into the creek and stood silently refusing to come out. For his defiance the overseer shot him in the head in front of an audience of terrified slaves (Douglass, 1893: 76-78; 1969: 122-123; 1995: 13-15). Since this was a crime to neither courts nor white community and slaves’ grievances and testimonies were inadmissible (Douglass, 1969: 124, 316-317, 449; 1995: 14), the only repercussion was an enquiry from Demby’s owner as to the reason. The reply given is telling: “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.” (Douglass, 1995: 14, my emphasis) Soon afterward, a neighbouring

slaveholder shot another slave for straying (starving and seeking oysters) onto his stretch of river (Douglass, 1893: 81; 1969: 123-7; 1995: 15). Though he survived, there was “very little said about it at all, and nothing done” nor would there have been had he died (Douglass, 1995: 15). Douglass mentions numerous other murders either for failure or—typically—resistance (Douglass, 1893: 78-81; 1969: 127; 1995: 15). No perpetrator faced any justice or stigmatization, and slaves had no redress save violent resistance (absent in these cases): these acts and their perpetrators were effectively sovereign with respect to the slave population, incurring only the prospect of explaining to other whites. Lest these instances be thought aberrant, or mere excuses for the violent proclivities of particular individuals, this practice appears regularly in slave narratives as noted above. The explanation’s *accuracy* is less important than that it *functions* reliably as an effective explanation – part of the circulating “true” discourse about master/slave relations, an authorised, intelligible and *acceptable* statement. As such it is revealing of the strategic logic of the state of domination and its associated discourses.

Between sovereign perpetrator and victim, murder is clearly a relationship of violence that terminates *power* along with resistance. However, its primary *useful* function is not killing the slave—an economic loss—but that in terrorising the others it ‘reactivates’ a *power relation* between sovereign and spectators, reproducing the ‘unrestrained presence’ (Foucault, 1977a: 49) of the master-as-sovereign, and instating the plantation as an exceptional space under the sovereign’s self-founded law. This is, strictly speaking, a *power* relation as it requires the response and self-modification of the audience and can in principle—at great risk—be resisted or responded to in different ways.

## **Torture**

This duality as both violence (to the one) and power (to the many) may be clearer with respect to examples of non-fatal torture, which Scarry (1985: 27 cited in Bakare-Yusuf, 1999: 318) describes as ‘mock execution’.

Whippings occur with overwhelming frequency in Douglass’s narratives (e.g. Douglass, 1893: 55, 64, 70, 137, 139, 148; 1969: 149, 201, 203, 214, 262, 277; 1995: 4-5, 10-12, 21, 27-28, 33-36, 41, 43-45, 47). No master is mentioned who does not flog, and the most resistant slaves are sent to Covey, the brutal ‘negro-breaker’. For Douglass, whipping is essential to slavery – the sole motivation for work (Douglass, 1969: 216). He suggests elsewhere that rewards are also relevant—though still supplemental to whipping—including ‘privileged’ positions on the master’s sloop (Douglass, 1995: 5), the relative freedom of certain journeys (Douglass, 1893: 60-61), and domestic positions at the ‘Great House’ (a ‘slave aristocracy’ (Douglass, 1969: 109)).

The Nietzschean idea of a ‘mnemonics of pain’ underlying Foucault’s *Discipline and Punish* concerns the *construction*—the ‘paining into existence’—of a *capable subject* (specifically one capable of promising (Dumm, 1996: 75-77)). In contrast, Scarry (1985) argues that in torture, pain destroys language through its non-referentiality, serving to *deconstruct* the world of the subject, indeed to *desubjectify* (Bakare-Yusuf, 1999: 317). The body-in-pain is a body excluded from participation in civic life – a body torn from language whose subject is reduced to flesh – unmade with his or her world (Bakare-Yusuf, 1999: 315). This is *violence* in Foucault’s sense—destroying the subject that might resist (producing a rupture in processes of subjectification

(power))—yet it also writes on the “living parchment” (Douglass, 1969: 177) of the body a permanent mark – a sign in a *power* relation with others.

If we were to assume a ‘rational’ unitary subject we might expect the greatest prevalence of *thoughts of escape* to correlate with the *worst* times, whereas Douglass claims the exact opposite—that it was at times of greatest violence, deprivation and suffering that he and others were *least* able to resist or conceive escape (Douglass, 1969: 263). Understanding pain as desubjectifying and world-destroying helps us make sense of this otherwise perhaps confusing finding: as I argue later, self-creation—possible through gaps in violence and power—was central to Douglass’s resistance, and it is precisely this that extreme pain destroys or delays.

Though lacking pain’s non-referentiality and concomitant language-destroying capacity (Bakare-Yusuf, 1999: 314), it appears widespread sleep deprivation and starvation (Douglass, 1893: 62-63; 1969: 188, 197; 1995: 6, 16, 31) may have supported desubjectification by weakening and reducing slaves to bodily need, rendering them unable to conceive of major resistance – certainly Douglass counts hunger alongside torture in reducing his ability to imagine escape: “Beat and cuff your slave, keep him hungry and spiritless, and he will follow the chain of his master like a dog; but, feed and clothe him well,—work him moderately—surround him with physical comfort,—and dreams of freedom intrude. Give him a bad master, and he aspires to a good master; give him a good master, and he wishes to become his *own* master.” (Douglass, 1969: 263)

While Foucault does not tell us much about this aspect of violence, his analysis of sovereignty suggests torture is simultaneously an element in a *power* relation with other slaves who witness it, which is vulnerable to resistance from slaves. At times, when the slave is hired out to another plantation, it is also affected by relations among masters and overseers. It is also, especially when slaves are hired to other plantations, situated in a wider web of power relations among masters and among slaves, though the near-sovereign recourse to murder in response to all-out resistance remained a permanent threat. Everyday whippings were both certain *and* severe, and did not necessarily concern any immediate conduct of the slave in question – indeed it was near-impossible for a slave *not* to ‘deserve’ whipping thanks to an astonishingly long list of “justifications” (Douglass, 1969: 260-261) and because any argument immediately proved his/her ‘impudence’ (Douglass, 1893: 161; 1969: 230). Flogging was often carried out without “any expectation that the slave whipped will be improved by it” but “with a view to its effect upon others” (Douglass, 1969: 262): thus, torture partakes of the same ‘sovereign’/power-reactivating logic as execution, functioning as exemplary spectacle to others. Douglass believed Covey’s whipping of him was increased by his *inability* to whip another slave, Bill, whose owner was richer than the poor farm-renter Covey (Douglass, 1969: 262) and forbade whipping *his* slaves except for criminal acts. For his part, Bill knew and used that fact, which became crucial at a critical moment of resistance for Douglass (below).

### **“Discipline”**

The risk of failure (i.e. resistance) is a problem for episodic, spectacular sovereign power, which also leaves spaces unreached by the sovereign in which illegalities and

'hidden transcripts' may flourish, such as the clandestine slave economy "carried on with virtual impunity" (Parenti, 2003: 16). Discipline responds with subtler, continuous and further-reaching power mechanisms.

As might be expected, since it is defined *against* slavery (Foucault, 1977a: 137, many aspects of discipline—for example, augmenting the body's capabilities, self-regulation and segmentation of time, meticulous measuring and ranking—appear of little use in understanding Douglass's account. While Foucault's thesis concerns the genealogy of a generalized "legislative and penalizing will" (Lingis, 1999: 289) attaching to and producing new objects in response to shifting needs, I am interested primarily in his analysis of the technology of the panopticon.

The panopticon (see chapter 1) exercises power *through* individuals themselves. Although the threat of violence underlies its coercive potential, it functions by rendering that violence unnecessary: the individual "subjected to a field of visibility and who knows it, assumes responsibility for the constraints of power; he makes them play spontaneously upon himself; *he inscribes in himself the power relation in which he simultaneously plays both roles*; he becomes the principle of his own subjection" (Foucault, 1977a: 202-203, my emphasis). Sporadic, potential *violence* becomes, through the individual, the exercise of continuous, actualised *power*.

There is no *literal* panopticon on the plantation, but disciplinary self-regulation in response to surveillance (enabled by the positioning of the slaves and the unverifiable presence of a concealed observer) remains pertinent.

Covey—the “negro-breaker”—employed not only violence but also disciplinary *power*. He routinely, secretly surveilled his slaves – hiding, creeping around, pointedly riding away on horseback then sneaking back on foot. The slaves rarely knew *if* they were being watched or not (Douglass, 1969: 215-216; 1995: 36-37) thus *learnt* to behave as if they *were*: “There was no deceiving him. His work went on in his absence almost as well as in his presence; and he had *the faculty of making us feel that he was ever present* with us [...] it was never safe to stop a single minute.” (Douglass, 1995: 36, my emphasis) Audibility functioned similarly to visibility: masters required slaves to sing to show they were working and not plotting or idling (Douglass, 1893: 61).

Broader disciplinary effects (of *unknown* or *unverifiable* watchers) emerged from Douglass’s owner—Colonel Lloyd—owning so many slaves on out-farms that many did not recognise him, nor he them (Douglass, 1969: 116; 1995: 11). A story well known amongst the slaves was that Colonel Lloyd encountered a slave (whose skin would mark him as such in advance) of whom he inquired to whom he belonged and whether he was worked too hard. The slave answered that he belonged to Colonel Lloyd and was indeed overworked, “not dreaming he had been conversing with his master” (Douglass, 1969: 117; 1995: 11). Weeks later, without warning or being permitted to even say goodbye to his family, he was chained and sold to Georgia traders (Douglass, 1995: 11), a dreaded fate (Douglass, 1969: 301). It is unsurprising then that slaves “when inquired of [...] almost universally say they are contented, and that their masters are kind” (Douglass, 1995: 11) – simultaneously feeding the myth of happy slaves that deflected Northern critical attention (Douglass, 1995: 9) and helping restrict ‘hidden transcripts’ to slaves *within* the plantation. While in



Bentham's panopticon the individual was "the object of information, never a subject in communication" (Dumm, 1996: 105), here it is the moment the slave is temporarily a speaking subject (though still an object and property, conditioning the risk) that is the moment of surveillance. In a cruel irony, it is the very moment the slave might speak out that is turned against the slave and becomes the moment s/he must speak in favour of his/her condition – and Douglass considered his answers truthful, as there were worse masters (Douglass, 1995: 12).

Douglass notes examples of spies being sent among slaves, and that slaves from *different* plantations would fight claiming *their* master was best (Douglass, 1969: 118; 1995: 12). Even in the relatively free (compared to the plantation) environment of Baltimore, upon encountering two Irishmen who advised him to escape to the North, Douglass feigned disinterest, fearing they might seek to catch and return him to his master for a reward (Douglass, 1893: 113; 1969: 170; 1995: 25). Describing planning his first, unsuccessful, escape attempt Douglass recounts the slaves' perception that there was "at every gate [...] a watchman—at every ferry a guard—on every bridge a sentinel—and in every wood a patrol" (Douglass, 1995: 50) – a powerful imagined geography of swamps, wild beasts and human treachery that served to discipline slaves. The reality of the patrols is not disputed, but the productive effect is that however few or many spies or patrols there were, the perception served to discipline performance and discourage escape. It was, however—as *power*—resistible: governors, patrols (often themselves illiterate hence unable to read the passes they demanded) and slaves engaged in a prolonged battle of subversions and responses, with passes written, patrols fooled, ordinances passed to make the passes harder to forge and include specific identifying physical

characteristics (Parenti, 2003: 13-32) to which slaves responded by using papers of freemen with suitable likeness – a subversion of discipline central to Douglass’s successful escape (Douglass, 1893: 245-246).

I do not mean to imply that the metaphorical panopticon described above is *necessarily* a deliberate design, nor is there any need to, given Foucault’s assertion of power’s non-subjective intentionality (Foucault, 1998: 94-95), though the system of passes was quite deliberate, as were Covey’s practices. Disciplinary surveillance contributed to the production of each plantation as a delimited space in which masters’ actions were thus protected from outside scrutiny, hence *this* disciplinary effect is neither contrary to or displaces sovereign power, rather it helps *produce* the effective micro-sovereignty of the slaveholders.

Though the panopticon has proven useful, the non-applicability of the rest of Foucault’s thesis should not be ignored. While Foucault defined discipline against slavery (albeit without *detailing* “slavery” – see chapter 1), his thesis of the generalized shift from sovereignty to discipline (apparently including the USA in Douglass’s time (Foucault, 1977a: 15)) appears somewhat inaccurate for its millions of slaves, who were subject to violence and sovereign modalities of power, coupled to certain *selected* disciplinary technologies. While we may consider this a slip of insufficient detail, interrogating the interaction of discipline, sovereign power and violence may have greater significance. Foucault did not claim the *total* replacement of sovereignty by discipline (Foucault, 2000c: 219), implying attention to sovereignty’s reinscription *in the regime of discipline*? Here, however, it appears more appropriate to speak of discipline *in a regime of sovereignty*. It is striking that

*other* aspects of discipline, those of training, exercises, education, the responsibility of the self, ranking of individuals, and the examination were actively denied the slaves. Escape to a disciplinary space of ‘free work’ constituted a liberation for Douglass, and the embrace of discipline in extreme circumstances may constitute resistance to desubjectification, as in Levi’s discussion of Auschwitz, where self-discipline was a form of resistance against dehumanization and beginning-to-die – the death-of-self preliminary to literal bodily death (Levi, 1960: 41 cited in Dumm, 1996: 146).

Excluding plantation spaces from a broader disciplinary society may perform a productive or constitutive function with respect to that disciplinary society. One possibility would be to consider these sovereign spaces as “heterotopias of deviation” (though Foucault refers to abnormal *behaviours* (Foucault, 2000a: 180), not attributes). Space precludes discussing all six principles of heterotopias (see Foucault, 2000a). The key point, and sixth principle, is that heterotopias are “other spaces” that “have a function in relation to the remaining space” (Foucault, 2000a: 184). Dumm argues “heterotopias of deviance” constitute the space underlying liberal “negative freedom”, ostensibly universal neutrality being established as a norm by excluding various abnormals (Dumm, 1996: 55) – precisely the operation necessary for slavery to coexist with the “land of the free”. Considering slavery as a heterotopia may therefore have provocative consequences for notions of “freedom”. Neither hypothesis can be adequately addressed with the evidence and space available, but further exploration would be interesting, perhaps adding to the significance of the resistances outlined below.

## Resistances

### Refusal, Physical Resistance and Escape

The most immediately obvious forms of resistance are perhaps escape, refusal and physical resistance. Escape is possible precisely because of the territorial limits on slaveholders' *de facto* sovereignty though I have suggested various disciplinary effects helped reduce the perceived likelihood of success. Additionally, the Fugitive Slave Act (1850) extended this reach *de jure* to the Northern States. Rather than dwelling on escape, I address physical resistance and refusal, and then other resistances, which may have contributed to the possibility of escape.

Whilst the relative fixity and overwhelming imbalances of master/slave relations—including the threat of death—discouraged resistance, encounters are always vulnerable to the possibility that the slave will resist physically, hiding or fighting back.

A turning point in Douglass's story came after six months with Covey. After an especially brutal beating, Douglass hid in woods before unsuccessfully seeking his owner's intervention. Seeing no alternative, he returned and was attacked by Covey, but on this occasion resisted blow for blow. Temporarily unarmed, Covey was reduced to calling for help from other slaves in order to master Douglass. This was resistible—and indeed resisted—albeit at personal risk: Bill, knowing he was protected (see earlier), feigned ignorance of Covey's requirements, declared he had been ordered *to work* for Covey, not to help him whip Douglass, and walked off (Douglass, 1893: 175-176; 1995: 43). Covey's own slave Caroline showed marked

courage (for she had no such protection and was herself beaten) in similarly refusing (Douglass, 1893: 176). While violent the *power relation* through Douglass's body-assign between Covey and the other slaves was resistible – exemplary whippings of Douglass evidently failed to achieve the desired response, instead invoking sympathy and solidarity.

The significance for Douglass was immense: he experienced this as a “*resurrection* from the dark and pestiferous tomb of slavery, to the heaven of comparative freedom”, and having become unafraid to die, he felt “a freeman in fact” if not, *yet*, in form (Douglass, 1969: 247). In convincing masters that s/he cannot be whipped—only shot—the slave succeeds in *partly* reversing the power relations and presenting the master with an all-or-nothing choice (Scott, 1990: 208). This might initially seem a very modest victory – despite thwarting Covey's intention to whip him Douglass goes on working – it did not *immediately* herald his liberation. Yet it enables him to *feel* freer, to posit himself undeniably as a man, to value himself and believe in his future freedom, as well as significantly improving his day-to-day treatment, and his standing among other slaves (Douglass, 1893: 180). It changes—indeed marks—Douglass as an individual, and constitutes a physical and psychic barrier to his further violent desubjectification: his life as subject begins again, he believes indomitably. Had Covey reported this incident Douglass would almost certainly have hanged (Douglass, 1969: 248), or at best been sold to the South. Douglass attributes his good fortune to the web of power relations in which *Covey* is embedded. His carefully guarded reputation as negro-breaker was his source of status and labour, and to this Douglass attributes Covey's silence (Douglass, 1893: 178; 1969: 248; 1995: 43-44) and hence his own survival.

## **Failed Performances and Spaces of Resistance**

Chapter 1 outlined Foucault's insistence that power exists only insofar as it is exercised, and that power relations operate through producing particular subjectivities, both of dominant and dominated. Butler's theorisation of performativity highlights the importance of performances that do not match up to the norm (regardless of conscious intent). This suggests that gaps, failures, or more accurately *different re-iteration* of performance may produce a space in which resistance becomes more possible than might otherwise be the case. Douglass gains a precious glimpse of slavery's logic, and hence space for resistance, through what I would suggest is precisely such a failed performance. Having moved to Baltimore, the 8-year-old Douglass was supervised by Mrs Auld. She had never kept slaves and, ignorant of the master's *role*, initially treated Douglass kindly as a fellow human (Douglass, 1893: 92; 1969: 144), even agreeing to teach him to read (Douglass, 1893: 94; 1969: 145; 1995: 20). Douglass goes so far as to attribute all his future prosperity to his literacy, an achievement for which he thanks Mrs Auld and, ironically, her husband who upon discovering his wife's actions forbade further instruction. Underestimating the young boy's comprehension, he lectured his wife on the illegality and danger of her actions, affording Douglass a glimpse into the 'hidden transcript' of his masters: "Learning would *spoil* the best nigger in the world [...] if you teach that nigger [...] how to read, there would be no keeping him" (Douglass, 1995: 20). Following this epiphany regarding the crucial role of illiteracy and ignorance in maintaining the slave system Douglass resolved, against the fervent opposition of master and mistress, to learn to read and write. Notwithstanding Douglass's ingenuity in tricking or persuading other children to teach him letters and obtaining reading materials (Douglass, 1893: 101-102; 1969: 155-157; 1995: 23),

observing shipbuilders writing on ship parts and secreting himself in the kitchen loft with his master's son's copy books (Douglass, 1893: 115; 1969: 171-172; 1995: 25-26), that this was possible at all reveals crucial spaces for resistance. This is in both metaphorical (the space produced by his mistress's 'failed' performance, *part of power relations*) and literal senses of a space—the attic—under the masters' noses yet outside their routine surveillance, where it was possible to hide. Harriet Jacobs hid for years in such a space (Jacobs, 2001), a 'loophole' that Burnham (2001: 285-287) connects to the imperfection of panoptic surveillance).

Subsequent negative changes in Mrs Auld exemplify a recurrent theme in Douglass's narratives about the detrimental effects of slavery upon masters as well as slaves, consistent with Foucault's general position that relations of power are not simply relations between two unitary individuals, but are relations productive of subjectivities.

### **Everyday Forms of Resistance**

Refusals, physical resistance and escape are only the most resistances. Such large-scale states of domination as antebellum slavery afford "fairly extensive social existence outside the immediate control of the dominant" (Scott, 1990: xi). This space both offers opportunities for—and is created by—practices of everyday resistance. These manifold resistances, taken together constitute a disguised critique of power (Scott, 1990: xiii) that typically remains 'off-stage' as a 'hidden transcript' beneath 'public' performances, but occasionally bursts onto the main stage, as in the case of Douglass's resistance to Covey (Scott, 1990: 208). Douglass's account

exemplifies Scott's analyses of pilfering (Scott, 1990: 188-189), careful control of work rates (Douglass, 1893: 184), and singing (Scott, 1990: 162).

Slaves' singing expressed their deepest sorrows (Douglass, 1893: 61-62; 1995: 8). Gilroy (1993) connects slaves' music with the violence suffered: pain, despite its language-destroying capacity is nevertheless not unrepresentable (Gilroy, 1993 cited in Bakare-Yusuf, 1999: 315). The expressive splitting of language from sound comes forth strongly in Douglass's moving discussion, and underlies the subversive double-meanings of the songs. Whilst masters expected (and even required) slaves to sing and held it to be a sign of happiness, slave songs masked their meanings, connecting meaningless or happy words with sorrowful or angry music, or cheerful energetic music with deeply sorrowful words (Douglass, 1893: 61-62; 1995: 8) – a tactical indeterminacy in the protracted battle with masters (Gilroy, 1993: 74). Furthermore key words constituted a secret language, thus slaves singing of “Canaan” sang of the North and freedom in earshot of their masters (Douglass, 1969: 278-279). When slaves were alone, their songs would include “sharp hits” against slaveholders (Douglass, 1969: 252-253). Similarly, while separated from other plantations (see above), *within* a plantation, slaves would “execrate” and mock their masters (Douglass, 1969: 118; 1995: 12) and call them names, for example Covey was “the snake” (Douglass, 1893: 149; 1995: 36). In the case of one master Douglass reports he was “an inapt pupil” at learning to call him “Master”, something that evidently caused the master some anxiety and confusion, and Douglass some enjoyment (Douglass, 1969: 192-193). Thus, the outwardly respectful address, “Captain Auld”, was in fact a disrespectful contestation of status – a “sly civility” (see Bhabha, 1994b) a mimicry of servility that marks “moments of civil disobedience *within the discipline*



*of civility*” (Bhabha, 1985: 162, my emphasis), tapping into slaveholders’ anxieties and resisting/subverting the disciplinary structures of slavery.

Slaves employed various strategies to combat starvation (sometimes at great risk – see above). Douglass recounts stealing food and begging (Douglass, 1893: 81; 1969: 126, 189-191, 202; 1995: 9-10, 31) and justifies this by arguing that slavery renders it almost impossible for the slave to commit an immoral or criminal act, both since “freedom of choice is the essence of accountability” (Douglass, 1969: 191) and the slave only takes the fruits of his/her own labour. Douglass justifies not only theft from individual masters but from “society at large”, which had “bound itself, in form and fact, to assist [...] in robbing me of my rightful liberty.” (Douglass, 1969: 191) Theft, then, is simultaneously survival *and a critique of power* – in Scott’s terms a ‘hidden transcript’, now publicised by Douglass as itself an act of resistance in his narratives.

Such practices affirm a realm of freedom into which masters cannot usually intrude. Scott discusses the cumulative impact of such myriad small resistances in terms of a hydraulic metaphor in which power ‘presses down’ producing ‘pressure’ from below that will eventually burst unless released (Scott, 1990: 186). Pursuing this metaphor, we may question whether ‘hidden transcripts’ and such spaces of resistance serve to *dissipate* such pressure, or to *sustain* and store it until an outburst of *public* critique or resistance (Scott, 1990: 177-180; 185-192). Whilst Scott clearly appreciates different resistances, is critical of this metaphor, and disavows any universalising theory (Scott, 1990: xi) his discussion does not note—and appears to replicate—a problematic *effect* of this metaphor, homogenising *resistances* (plural) as *resistance* (singular), a move at

odds with the Foucauldian linkage of power and resistance. Since power varies, there is neither “resistance” nor any “soul of revolt” for Foucault, only “resistances” (Foucault, 1998: 95-96). These *may* coalesce but Foucault suggests an appropriate metaphor is that of networks or circuits of power interacting in complex fashion, hence irreducible to a hydraulic image. Even in the relatively static power relations of a state of domination such a metaphor still seems problematic in light of Foucault’s caution against a negative view of power as that which only represses (and thus, in its own interest, might ease off a little to ‘let off steam’). Scott (1990: 185) notes that Douglass himself employs this metaphor: Douglass’s analysis of the function of Christmas holidays indeed states “these holidays are conductors or safety-valves” (Douglass, 1969: 254, quoted in Scott, 1990: 185) however Scott disregards another more subtle suggestion in the same section, which reveals another function, *positively productive* of a specific subjectivity that has important consequences for understanding other aspects of Douglass’s resistance.

### **Religion, Literacy and Self-Creation**

That neglected suggestion is that the holidays function to disgust the slave with freedom, i.e. to produce a subjectivity that finds “freedom” repulsive and is convinced “that there was little to choose between liberty and slavery” (Douglass, 1969: 255; 1995: 45). At Christmas, masters encouraged slaves (betting and deeming refusal “disgraceful”) to drink to such excess that Douglass found himself “feeling, on the whole, rather glad to go, from what our master had deceived us into a belief was freedom, back to the arms of slavery.” (Douglass, 1969: 255; 1995: 45) To the masters, “sober, thinking” slaves were dangerous (Douglass, 1969: 256). This is part of that aspect of slavery that operates not by pure violence but through seeking to

encourage slaves to ‘make themselves’ in particular ways, and not in others. Though reinforced through violence, this ultimately requires that it be exercised on and in the slave himself: “To make a contented slave, you must make a thoughtless one. It is necessary to darken his moral and mental vision, [...] to annihilate his power of reason [...] *It must not depend upon mere force*; the slave must know no Higher Law than his master's will.” (Douglass, 1969: 320, my emphasis)

Violence gained meaning through justificatory discourses (notably, pervasive racism and Christianity). Slaveholders found Biblical support for slavery, teaching slaves to accept their position as God’s will, and their masters as just. Douglass records with exasperation slaves who accepted and recirculated their masters’ biblical interpretation as justifying their enslavement and punishments (Douglass, 1969: 159), suggesting it was efficacious to persuade slaves to *accept* violence where possible, and crucial that they should know no other “Christianity”. Violence, then, was suffused with discourse – one small example of the importance of religion – however religious counter-discourses were crucial to slave resistance and central to outside abolitionist efforts. Whilst religion served to support slavery, it also exemplifies the “tactical polyvalence” of discourses (Foucault, 1998: 100). The Bible is equivocal on slavery – whilst some sections can be read as supporting it (e.g. Exodus 21:2-6; Exodus 21:20-21; Titus 2:9-10; 1 Timothy 6:1; Luke 12:46-48 (see Douglass, 1995: 33)), others offer powerful resources for slaves to identify with. Slaves themselves seized upon Christianity, adapting it and interpreting it in light of their experiences: Douglass identifies with biblical Israel (Douglass, 1893: 264) – offering hope for emancipation in this life. Religion contributed to slaves’ critiques of their masters, perhaps suggesting justice to come in the next life: Douglass invokes God’s

righteous vengeance (Jeremiah 5:9 – see Douglass, 1995: 74), while “He can’t go to heaven with our blood in his skirts” was accepted slave wisdom (Douglass, 1969: 195). It also offered chances to identify and ruthlessly mock the immense hypocrisy of slaveholding religion – a tactic employed in Douglass’s narratives to blistering effect.

In addition to oral religion—a hidden transcript of slave meetings and discourse (Scott, 1990: 14)—religion was also closely tied to literacy. So important was slave *illiteracy*, teaching slaves to read was severely punished (Douglass, 1969: 432), while mobs of *Christian* class-leaders violently ended slaves’ attempts to read the Bible (Douglass, 1969: 200, 266). This might be understood simply in terms of “knowledge is power”, whereby one unitary subject knows more than another unitary subject who is thus tactically disadvantaged; hence the slave who learns gains capacity. However Foucault’s subtler connection of power-knowledge and subjectivity suggests we should look deeper. The *power* of slavery, insofar as it is relational, could not operate without producing corresponding knowledges and corresponding individuals. Combining this with Scarry’s notion of violence *desubjectifying*, part of the power of *learning* to read and interpret for oneself may be that it is a form of resistance that both *directly challenges desubjectification* – an act of self-creation amidst destruction – *and* enables production of counter-knowledges and contestation of a slave identity consisting only of a naturally low status. Douglass finds purpose, past and future in religion, in believing he can be a preacher (Douglass, 1969: 168-169), and in both *learning* to read and write and *teaching* others. He experiences himself as a capable subject, special, valuable to others (Douglass, 1969: 182), and unable to be bound forever. Convinced of the liberating power of literacy (and the practical necessity of

writing passes (a key technology of slave surveillance (Parenti, 2003: 15, 21)) for himself and other escapees to deflect their racial visibility), Douglass integrates his teaching/learning into a coherent narrative of self-identity, extended through time in a way that enables him to escape the present. Such self-creation—self-narration—is performative. The *telos* of his story-of-self is to be freedom-from-slavery but its enactment and continual self-recitation is a form of future-oriented freedom-within-slavery.

Douglass's repeated involvement (despite location changes and mobs of indignant slaveholders) in Sabbath schools (Douglass, 1893: 136, 186; 1969: 199-201, 264-268; 1995: 33, 48-49) was part of, and helped produce, a community of others engaged in such threatening practices. I am suggesting therefore that regardless of any increase in objective capacity, and regardless of the (undoubted) accuracy of Douglass's analysis of the role of illiteracy, literacy was significant in the narration of a self-identity, a 'full' subjectivity. The inclusion of a notion of developing the self as a coherent 'narration' helps unite many resistances into a larger effect without resorting to a hydraulic metaphor or assuming the actual homogeneity or objective coherence of those resistances. This does not presume an independent teleological reality of necessarily progressing events: rather, it is my suggestion that the *process* of actively constructing such a narrative of self performatively *effected* self-identity against a system which functioned through the *denial* of self-identity and full subjecthood as attributes that could be located in a body marked as slave. Performativity implies neither *ex nihilo* creation nor that there is no internal psyche (Butler, 1999: xv)—indeed Butler accuses Foucault of neglecting the psyche's subversive potential (Butler, 1997b: 3 cited in Salih, 2002: 120)—but suggests the

internality of the psyche, the materiality of the body, and power relations are not easily separable: the psyche forms (imperfectly) in response power, but power has a psychic 'life' hence is vulnerable (see Butler, 1997b).

Douglass's formation of an 'internal' self was powerfully resistant and subversive, yet its form and formation depended on gaps in the situation, failures in the performance of the dominant (particularly in his mistress beginning to teach him to read) and spaces (literal and figurative) in which he could develop. As such, although a Herculean achievement, it is not pure transcendence of power and violence, but the wilful uptake of power to escape violence and improve the bearability of power relations.

Admittedly, both my considering the 'author' (Douglass) with the apparently concomitant 'embrace' of identity, and Butler's partial acceptance of an internal realm are moves of which Foucault may have been suspicious given his critique of the notion of the author (Foucault, 1977c; 1988: 14 cited Mills 2003: 3; Dumm, 1996: xxi-xxiii) and preference for 'surface' rather than 'depth' (Prozorov, 2007: 37). I would stress I am not positing identity, depth or authorial consistency as natural attributes, rather suggesting that *in these circumstances of power and violence* it was resistant to *produce* and hold on to these *effects*. Foucault's critique of 'the author' and suspicion of 'identity' should be understood in the context of a political project concerned with identifying how our *subjectification* traps us, in the context of government through the *production* of subjectivity and the *ascription* of identity. It may be that in a state of domination where bodies are enslaved by the *destruction* of subjectivity and *denial* of identity (perhaps more accurately by restricting 'their'

identity to a minimal category, “slave”, but denying *self*-identity), embracing identity and subjectification may, on balance, be substantively liberating: the ‘traps’ of identity may be preferable to, and peculiarly able to loosen, the bodily trap of slavery.

### **Violence/Power, Desubjectification/Subjectification**

Based on Douglass’s account, this chapter has argued that *violence*—in both the everyday sense of physical attack, and the Foucauldian sense of (at least *temporarily*) non-resistible coercion—are central to slavery. However, the analysis of master-slave relations and the presence of so many resistances suggest *power* at work also.

Much of what Douglass describes – masters attempting to persuade and deceive slaves, disciplinary surveillance, spectacular violence to produce terror *in others* besides the victim – requires the uptake of the relation by the slave, or operates by enlisting the slave in his/her own subjection, hence qualifies as *power*. As Foucault suggests regarding discipline, this may come down to ‘economy’: these mechanisms were less ‘costly’ (in terms of intensity/frequency of application versus the potential for failure) than other more purely violent mechanisms. Fewer, sometimes absent, masters could control more slaves - certainly that is one implication of Douglass’s analysis of Covey (Douglass, 1995: 36). Slavery functioned in large part through the continual presence of the slave driver, but for preventing escape or ensuring the efficient running of certain aspects of the system this would be uneconomical. The productive mixing of relationships of violence with relations of power enables the effects of violence to be extended through time, seeking to ensure slaves ‘drive’

themselves, and perpetuating the relative fixity of the “state of domination”, rendering resistance difficult but also producing possibilities to the extent that *power* operated.

Employing *power* potentially improves masters’ self-image and social standing: happy slaves signify the master’s quality as patriarch and function to enable the disqualification as abnormal of resistant slaves (Tynes Cowan, 2005: 22). Douglass notes many related examples: the importance of visitors seeing the well-fed, well-dressed slaves at the Great House (Douglass, 1893: 68); the (disciplined) reports of slaves to outsiders that their masters are kind (Douglass, 1995: 11); slaves’ songs interpreted as signs of happiness (Douglass, 1995: 9); and the vilification of resistant slaves as *abnormal* (Douglass, 1893: 179; 1969: 250).

These are *suggested* logics as to why *power* may be useful and slavery was not only violence, not claims that such requirements *caused* those relations (furthermore, strategies are internal to power and distinct from *purposes* (Dean, 1999: 22)). Such a *causal* claim would sit uneasily with Foucault’s understanding of history (see Foucault, 1977b) and archaeological and genealogical methods, which have in any case not been employed here. It would require considerably more and different research to write a history of these practices, rather than interpreting a snapshot.

The suggestion then, based on Douglass’s snapshot, is that this “state of domination” has violence at its core, as its condition of possibility, but while horrendous it was neither boundless nor limitless. Violence produced a domain in which relations of *power* then come in to play, with the permanent threat of and continuing periods of strategic recourse to violence (such as whipping or sending to the negro-breaker).



However, the *power* involved, in discipline for example, is not merely an alternative to violence: it also serves to segregate and thus reinforce the space in which ‘sovereign’ violence is possible.

I have also argued that violence and power both work through individual bodies, in distinct ways. However, is there a contradiction suggesting power operates by producing specific subjectivities—*subjectification*—while violence operates by *desubjectification*? Does this not imply power and violence counteract one-another? This is not necessarily the case, though gaps in power *can* enable escape from violence. Generally, one could suggest these are processes operating at different times, such that (put very simply) *desubjectification* ‘clears a space’ for the production of other docile subjectivities, though this seems perhaps suspiciously neat. The ‘need’ to separate these two processes in time in order that they do not contradict one-another perhaps flows from an assumption that there either *is* or *isn’t* a subject, that the subject is a fact and not an effect. If as Foucault suggested the subject is a form, there may not be *one* subject, but multiple processes of formation and deformation. Bakare-Yusuf (1999: 315) argues the “(near) impossibility of constituting pain in language *initiates a splitting, a splitting between the speaking subject (voice) and corporeal subject (body)*”. Perhaps it is this dissociation that is crucial, such that a minimal, docile, speaking subject may be constituted in accordance with slavery’s needs while the body is appropriated. This would make sense in light of Douglass’s experience of ‘resurrection’: describing his first six months with Covey Douglass’s body reads as a collection of pained parts, the source of vulnerability, or as his commonality with animals similarly to be broken (Douglass, 1969: 213). After his fight, he rediscovers his body not as the locus of pain but as the

source of freedom and protection. Here his tone changes: he speaks of himself with plans and confidence, as strong rather than vulnerable. This reconnection with his body grounds his subsequent determination to be free and his belief that he *can and will be*. The project of self-development begun in Baltimore is restarted: from this point he consciously plans escape (Douglass, 1969: 273-274), soon restarts his teaching (Douglass, 1969: 264-268), and measures himself against past and future, determining not to let a year pass without attempting escape (Douglass, 1969: 274). Chapter 3 extends this notion of self-creation-as-resistance, suggesting Douglass's narratives themselves be considered in performative terms, as extending his resistance beyond his own period in slavery, as part of a substantial shift in *national* understanding of self and slavery.

# 3

## Narrative as Resistance, Nation as Narration

The previous chapter considered Douglass's narratives as a *source of empirical information* on slavery, outlining some implications of and for Foucauldian understandings of power, violence and resistance. This chapter seeks to consider his autobiographical *narratives themselves as performative resistance*, and note some limits on Douglass's subversiveness. Towards the end of chapter 2, I argued that *self-creation* was key to Douglass's resistance to the desubjectifying effects of violence and the ascription of limited 'slave' identity, suggesting this self-creation was a sequence of *performative* acts, a narrative of self whereby repetitious narration of self produces the temporally extended effect of self.

To clarify and extend this, I first want to outline performativity further, as a response to an apparent problem with Foucault's understanding of subjects and power: if the subject is an effect of power relations, if resistance is always implicated in power and vice-versa, if there can be no final escape from power, what meaning can agency have? Space precludes extended discussion of ontology or other responses, which

would include Prozorov (2007)'s discussion of 'concrete freedom'. Prozorov's dismissal of subversive, mocking or identity-proliferatory tactics (Prozorov, 2007: 60, 65) in favour of 'indifference' (Prozorov, 2007: 69-77) or refusal of biopolitical care (Prozorov, 2007: 111) appears less helpful here than performativity, as used by Butler (1993; 1997a; 1999), and used by Bhabha (1994a) in relation to the idea of 'nation' as narration.

Butler's theory connects the persistent appearance and apparent persistence of 'essence', identity and subject with Foucault's insight that power constructs such objects, while simultaneously elucidating the possibilities and ontological nature of agency. 'Performativity' refers to a capacity of speech to either *cause* action (perlocution) or to actually *enact* (illocution) (Butler, 1997a: 3, 44; Austin, 1998). Butler draws on an illocutionary logic to suggest that which appears to be *expressed timeless essence* is actually the *retroactively* installed 'hallucinatory effect' of repetitious *future-directed* performances that *produce* that reality which they anticipate (Butler, 1999: xv) by 'citing' it. Such 'citation' simultaneously offers possibilities for repeating/re-citing *differently* – indeed, citation is necessarily 'imperfect' with respect to any speaker's intentions or even those regularities that might in Foucauldian terms be attributed to impersonal discourses: utterance calls forth a "condensed historicity: it *exceeds itself* in past and future directions" (Butler, 1997a: 3, my emphasis). 'Agency' is thereby rethought as utilising power's simultaneous need for citation and consequent vulnerability. This can not only *change* the resultant 'essence', but may subvert the effect of essentiality itself, as in Butler's example of 'drag' (Butler, 1999: 174-180) in which 'doing gender wrong' reveals the iterability and artifice of *all* gender. Voluntarism of a prior subject is not implied

(Butler, 1993: 3, 13, 94; 1999: xv), and ‘agency’ still operates within social constraints: Butler talks of subjects interpellated by ‘the law’, *forcibly citing* specific regulatory norms, however she also suggests that ‘law’ itself exists in action/citation and hence while compulsory is not absolutely determining or fixed (Butler, 1993: 14, 108, 231-232). The subject does not stand apart from and prior to its citational acts, rather the intelligible subject is the effect of performance. It is at any given moment both the constrained effect of prior citations *and* that which may be different in future and must, in any case, continue to be repeatedly performed; It is this temporal aspect that suggests something of the power of narrative to revalue the past, but it requires a turn to Bhabha to theorise that aspect more fully (see below).

Butler’s theory also displays a certain homology with Bhabha (acknowledged by Butler, 1999: 192 footnote 11), whose notion of hybridity similarly denies the existence of pure or *prior* identities or essences. Hybridity is not a mixture of prior elements (a dialectical third *term*), but the ‘original mixedness’ of all identity (Huddart, 2006: 6-7) and the “third *space*” (Bhabha, 1998: 211, my emphasis) from which ‘elements’ are made to appear. As an ontological assertion, hybridity provides a space for agency (based on *iterability* and the repressed Other) similar to that identified by Butler, even in extreme domination. However its *potential* is not necessarily fulfilled: ‘*articulation*’ is required for any effect (Norval, 1999a: 100; 1999b: 93). Noting the duality of contingent ‘linking’ and ‘speaking’ implied by ‘articulation’ (Hall, 1996: 141) I would suggest that it is precisely through the continued ‘*speaking*’ as performative (illocutionary) utterance that the *linking* of elements of ‘identity’ (more accurately, elements of hybridities) is iteratively maintained (or subverted) in time.

I have suggested that for Douglass, the performative production of a self, of a capable subjectivity and a coherent narrative of identity, was an important act of resistance precisely insofar as he found himself in a state of domination that functioned on the twin bases of desubjectification (through violence) and constructing (through/as *power*) specific minimal, docile, subjectivities. Slaves, then, were denied what Bhabha calls the 'right to narrate' (Huddart, 2006: 92-94) and status as fully human subjects (both as a discursive operation—for example through religious constructions of slaves as cursed—and (inseparably) as an effect of power and violence).

Douglass's Narratives can be seen as a forceful taking-up of the *subject* position denied him under slavery, performatively—illocutionarily—producing the effect of a subject in a body that 'should' not coincide with it – 'should' be a mere *object*. Through their increasingly self-reflective tone (Allen, 2008), the narratives repeatedly, almost compulsively, enact self-(re)creation – perpetuating and reiterating the process throughout his life and simultaneously inviting (perlocution) readers to join his excoriation of, and revulsion at slavery which is logically near-inseparable from accepting him—a slave—as a fellow articulate subject, and acknowledging his 'right to narrate'.

Douglass's own *articulation* is formidable, both in terms of his narrative and argumentative skill and in terms of the 'elements' he manages to articulate against the expectations and machinations of slavery. Here is an 'articulate' man, undeniably commanding intellectual respect, demonstrating uncommon literary and analytical skill in weaving his own story with the religious and humanitarian discourses of abolitionism. Yet the man doing this (Douglass was not unique in this, but was

especially prominent) is a *black man* and a *slave* – more commonly denied even the status ‘man’. Whilst in slavery, as was his design, literacy ‘unfitted’ him for slavery (Douglass, 1893: 97, 179-180; 1969: 146; 1995: 20). After his escape, such was the discursive environment that it was widely suggested that one so articulate could not have been a slave (Douglass, 1893: 269-270; 1969: 361-363; 1995: iii). His 1845 *Narrative* (Douglass, 1995) was expressly published to refute such suggestions. For a predominantly white audience (simply because so few slaves could access or read it – Allen, 2008), this contributed to wider destabilisations of the association of ‘black’/‘slave’ with ‘illiterate’/‘inarticulate’/‘passive *object*’, instead articulating ‘black man’/‘slave’ to a powerfully dignified image of human/intellectual capacity/refinement/‘articulate *subject*’ through and with a discourse that contested slaveholders’ religious interpretations. As should be clear from the linkage of articulation with hybridity above, these signs—“black man”, “slave”, etc.—are not elemental blocks whose rearticulation relocates them whole, rather articulation (Norval 1999a: 111) and relocation/recitation *alter* them. While Douglass may not have theorised in such terms, he was clearly aware of the effect of his writing and the subversive effect of his mere presence at state functions, in challenging both white views *and those of other black people*, some of whom questioned his place (Douglass, 1893: 445).

These performative effects may have changed the content-effect of, for example, “black man” but they did not necessarily subvert the very distinctions black/white, man/woman or their epistemological grounds. While Douglass’s efforts against racist prejudice cannot be doubted, on occasions he himself appears to operate within a discourse of ‘natural’ racial attributes. Whilst he fights the devaluation of ‘the black

man' he replicates the epistemological and ontological assumptions of the 'scientific' discourse of racism that would identify such an object of knowledge as 'the black man' in the first place (though he *may* at times be pandering to his audience's prejudices in order to subvert them). Consider this quotation: "The black man (*unlike* the Indian) loves civilisation. He does not make very great progress in civilisation himself, but he likes to be in the midst of it" (Douglass, 1893: 355). This would appear to repeat the *view* (so ably countered by Douglass's own *acts*) of the passive black man, who (as white racist discourse would hold) apparently needs civilisation to be brought in from outside. It also constructs "the black man" and "the Indian" as natural, essential identities. The comment on "the Indian"—no doubt unintentionally—is complicit in a discourse enabling domination, destruction and devaluation of native-American *cultures* as irretrievably savage *natures*. Douglass disputes the specific content of racial nature and clearly sees the importance and power of such content, but (unsurprisingly given his time and place) cannot see (as Foucault would argue) that 'naturalness' is itself an effect of power. Furthermore, Douglass has been accused of sexism: whilst he was, for his time and place and in his own words, "a woman's rights man", this may have been second to Black *men's* rights (hooks, 1982: 33-34, 89-91), though hooks perhaps undervalues his various statements to the contrary, indeed the masthead of Douglass's newspaper *North Star* places sex *before* race: "RIGHT IS OF NO SEX—TRUTH IS OF NO COLOUR" (Douglass, 1848). While he speaks extremely positively (and not condescendingly) about many women – in slavery, in abolitionism, on his trips abroad – Douglass frequently (38 instances in his autobiographies) adopts rhetorical strategies of excoriating *unmanly* slaveholders or lauding *manly* statesmen, subtly (however unintentionally) reinforcing a male/female public/private divide. Whilst Douglass



went remarkably far in his feminism and anti-racism, these aspects of Douglass highlight Foucault's points that liberation struggles are incomplete (Foucault, 2000b: 282-283) and we cannot escape power or discourse entirely.

There is perhaps room for more optimistic readings: Douglass demonstrates a concern with *questioning* such received wisdom and demanding it be proven or abandoned, at least when aware of it. Furthermore, his assertions that, for example, the relation of slavery *makes* masters indolent or violent, unhappy and dishonest (Douglass, 1893: 51, 93, 100-101; 1969: 105, 111-112, 142-145, 152-154, 161-162, 183; 1995: 22, 30), and that his former master, Thomas Auld (whom he once considered among the worst) was "a victim of the circumstances of birth, education, law, and custom" (Douglass, 1893: 535) suggest *produced subjectivities*, undermining any hierarchical and essentialist views. Perhaps the performative effects of his utterances exceeded themselves and him, undermining hierarchy and essentialist understandings regarding which his own stated views were either supportive or ambivalent.

We have seen that Douglass's narratives were a continuation of his self-creation and resistance *to* slavery beyond his actual escape *from* slavery, and were important for what they *did* as well as *said*. As suggested by these performative effects, Douglass's 'resistance' had repercussions far beyond his own personal life and the local power relations in which he found/made himself once liberated. His increasing prominence (infamy and fame), connections (with abolitionism in general, and with countless individuals lectured and spoken to, including Abraham Lincoln himself (Douglass, 1893: 421-425)), his best-selling autobiographies and political career *in* the state are indissociable from broader trends of discourse and power relations they helped

produce. Douglass's life, narratives and the political career they recount can be read as part of a contingent process of effecting a change in national identity that goes far beyond one man escaping slavery, or even all slaves escaping slavery, to a struggle over the meaning and significance of race, and a nation struggling over the rejection and revaluation of slavery in the context of its historical national identity.

Beyond Foucault's general point that power relations extend throughout society, from local performances upward, how might we theorise larger scales of politics such as national identity as embedded in discourse and smaller shifts in power? My purpose here is distinct from Weber's suggestion that the *state* is an effect of performative practices (Weber, 1998: 78), concerning rather how the *nation* as an imagined community (Anderson, 1983 cited in Bhabha, 1994a: 149) may be similarly conceived. To do so necessitates first outlining Bhabha's ideas on how a 'nation' exists through and in time, and by producing a national 'time' of history.

Bhabha's essay *DissemiNation* discusses the idea of 'nation' as 'narration' using the twin concepts of the performative and the pedagogical, and associated forms of 'time'. Bhabha's sparse formulation describes "the continuist, accumulative temporality of the pedagogical" ambivalently in tension with "the repetitious, recursive strategy of the performative" (Bhabha, 1994a: 145). The nation exists as a story told with authority (the pedagogical) and repeatedly cited (the performative). In constructing an image of a *history* the authorized and authorizing nationalist pedagogy posits time as a continuous building up of a national history – a coherent sequence of events whose principal character is the nation—the people—that undergoes them together and who are posited as sharing an origin (Bhabha,

1994a: 144-145). However, performativity would suggest that such an actor—the nation—is not the *source* of history but an *effect* of citational historiography. Certainly, for Bhabha, the pedagogical must be cited: the nation must be made to live. “[T]o demonstrate the prodigious, living principles of the people as contemporaneity” is a process that must erase that which precedes. Hence, the ambivalence – the performative may be seen as the *necessary* repetition for the ‘nation’ to ‘be’ or its perpetual ‘becoming’ but also as the condition of possibility for its change. The pedagogical cannot do without the performative, but the performative perpetually threatens to transgress the pedagogical. Douglass starts on those very excluded margins upon which Bhabha suggests the pedagogical is fixated: as a fugitive slave he is part of what Bhabha describes as the “transgressive, invasive structure of the black ‘national’ text” (Bhabha, 1994a: 144) engaged in a tactical guerilla warfare that Bhabha situates in Foucault’s suggestion that warfare continues beneath and through politics (see Foucault, 2004: 15-16). Douglass continued to be courageously involved in the Underground Railroad, and speaks with admiration of figures who were vilified in their time, such as John Brown, and who fought—literally—against slavery and against the nation-state’s support for it. Yet whilst he was consigned to the margins, his was not only an attempt to create a space for those he referred to (Douglass, 1893: 277, 367, 458) as “his people” (i.e. the slave and free coloured population of the United States). His attempt was not only part of performative subversion, nor was he anti-nationalist. It was also an attempt to ‘occupy’, contest and change nationalist *pedagogy* – not to contest the idea of a nationalist pedagogy or of America, rather its specific content – a contestation over the *future* “past” attributed to the *American* nation, that it should be a nation that looked back with revulsion on a shameful history of slavery. This role, through campaigning and his written works, in

contributing to the change in historical perception and national self-understanding is perhaps the apogee of Douglass's 'resistance' to slavery, pursued to the point where his position and influence is such that one wonders whether this 'resistance' is now better called 'power'? Of course, Foucault's point is that power and resistance are given at once; they are differentiated by their relational positions rather than by a difference in kind. This can be seen as an instance of a substantial *reversal* in power relations, such that the once-dominant slaveholders found themselves on the defensive. This is not to suggest a total change – the legacies of an incomplete emancipation persist today (Bales, 2004: 7) and Douglass was amongst the first to decry its inadequacies and campaign for improvement. Nor is it an escape from all power, or from nationalism – his freedom is not total, nor is his transgression: as with my earlier comments on Douglass's incomplete escape from racism and sexism, he did not seek to contest the ontological or epistemological presumptions of a nationalist pedagogy (for example the idea of national identity and history), rather to reinterpret the specific evaluation of that history – nonetheless I hope I have shown that his performative 'uptake' of the situation that life offered him was substantively important, not merely resistance doomed by its association with power, and demonstrates such theories can help identify and theorise change.

## **Conclusion**

This dissertation has explored Foucault's distinction between 'power' and 'violence' through a study of slavery, and studied slavery using Foucauldian concepts. I have argued the characterisation of slavery as pure coercion is inadequate, and that Foucault's rhetorical use of slavery as exemplary of "violence" is at best problematic. Despite the difficulty of empirically separating 'violence' and 'power' or characterising a situation as one or the other, their analytical separation enables an understanding of different, albeit simultaneous, processes.

There is a strong case for understanding aspects of slavery through the lens of 'power' as well as 'violence', at least in the case of Douglass's antebellum experience. Foucault's analysis of sovereignty proved instructive for understanding killing, torture and certain possibilities of resistance on the plantation, informing the argument throughout that there is a duality of power/violence in what can be considered a state of domination: violence where present is simultaneously part of power relations (for example, *violence* between master-murderer and slave-victim is *power* between master and *other* slaves. Understanding 'violence' aspects required a turn to Scarry's

theory of desubjectification, which although potentially in tension with Foucault, suggested violent *desubjectification* can operate alongside specific forms of *subjectification*.

The analysis of disciplinary surveillance raised the suggestion that Foucault's thesis of the shift *from* sovereignty *to* discipline was, at best, inadequately qualified with respect to the USA at this time (Foucault *does* note (but not specify) irregularities of the transformation (Foucault, 1977a: 15)). Surveillance was important in slavery but was decoupled from other aspects of discipline—dressage, segmentation of time, ranking, measuring and augmentation of capabilities, the changed political anatomy of body and 'gentle' punishment—which generally did not apply to the slave population. The dissertation has, in general, raised more questions than it has answered, including those regarding the possible functions of this extra-disciplinary sovereign space: the intriguing notion of the slavery as heterotopia appears just as relevant to today's understanding of freedom – as such I intend to consider this further in future. Much remains to investigate – for example, I have not dealt extensively with gender or race: my only defences are those of limited space and correspondingly limited goals and conclusions, and that my forthcoming PhD *will* seek to integrate such concerns.

Douglass's experiences cannot be presumed to be replicated in present day slavery, though there is still no *a priori* reason to discount *power*: again it will be necessary to seek evidence of resistance(s), and ask similar questions about the relationships of power, violence, and subjects. Certain of the phenomena identified (for example, spectacular killing or surveillance) suggest broader relevance, as their mechanics do

not necessarily presuppose ownership or racial difference. However, that Douglass's specific resistances and escape resulted from a number of historically specific aspects. Slaveholders' attempts to justify slavery and operate through discourse and tactics characterizable as *power* enabled resistances that undermined those justifications (whereas Bales (2004: 10) suggests today's slaveholders feel no need for justification and employ violence). Slavery's *legality* also made it possible for slaves to *not* be completely "in chains", thus not fitting Foucault's metaphor: since slavery was legal, masters could risk slaves moving about in the open (taking into account the disciplinary effects that produced a separation between plantations and between slaves and outsiders). Without these mechanisms, and without legality, it is likely that slaves' mobility will be even more curtailed: they may have no equivalent of the few 'leisure' hours (Douglass, 1893: 115; 1969: 182) Douglass had in which to foster his literacy and recover from violent desubjectification. They may also have less access to even the limited knowledge of freedom that Douglass was able to glean from people other than his immediate masters. In the absence of legality it is likely that more *violence*, in Foucault's sense, may be employed, in which case the potential for resistance and escape for today's post-abolition slaves may be diminished. Nonetheless—perhaps even more so—the need for a study of resistance among contemporary slaves, that does not presume total helplessness from the outset, remains acute.

Chapter 2 noted the problem of homogenising resistances with a hydraulic metaphor, but suggested an alternative, emphasizing the importance of performative construction of a self in response to both desubjectification and construction of dehumanized minimal identity. As this understanding is based not on Douglass

individually but on a model of power, subjectivity and identity as iterative and violence as desubjectifying it is likely this will have broader applicability, however it is particularly pronounced in Douglass's case, which may well have led me to overemphasize its importance. There is insufficient evidence to comment further, but the interaction of power and self underlies my research interests so this is something for future investigation. It is also unexplored in this dissertation how exactly those processes fit into abolitionist discourse in general. Chapter 3's discussion of narrating the nation touched on this, but perhaps raised more questions than it could answer – for example saying nothing about how or why this was successful, or how important it was. This has been an interpretive rather than a quantifiable finding, which would require *far* more research to stand with confidence. Both this and the heterotopia questions would perhaps be best dealt with in historical, or more accurately *genealogical*, fashion, reading these processes alongside other processes of national imagination and changes in punishment of 'freemen' respectively. It is perhaps unsurprising that in using Foucault's concepts I should find myself limited by not employing his methods, but these simply were not feasible for this project.

Chapter 3 also suggested Foucault's understanding of discourse and incomplete liberation struggles helps appreciate some limitations of Douglass's freedom from dominant discourses, though it was in fact remarkable how far he *did* go given his discursive and historical situation. It surely demonstrated too, *pace* his critics, that Foucault's ideas need not subdue resistance, that they can help theorise resistances great and small. Chapter 3 moved away from Foucault himself, but used theories that remain dependent upon—and extend—Foucauldian views of power and subjectivity, while clarifying some possibilities for reversals of power relations, albeit in an



unusual case. It is perhaps precisely the opportunity to move beyond his thought that attracts me to Foucault's ideas. In the spirit of his 'toolbox' for users rather than devotees, whilst this dissertation has not been particularly 'faithfully' *Foucauldian*, I hope the reader will feel my rummaging in that toolbox has been fruitful, or has at least demonstrated that the tools have potential, for I intend to continue 'rummaging'.

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