

**Postcolonial Counter-discourse in *The Life and Times of Frederick***

***Douglass***

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English Philology  
Master's Thesis  
October 2012

Tampereen yliopisto  
Englantilainen filologia  
Kieli-, käännös- ja kirjallisuustieteiden yksikkö

IISALO, SANELMA: Postcolonial Counter-discourse in *The Life and Times of Frederick Douglass*

Pro gradu –tutkielma, 65 sivua + lähdeluettelo  
Syksy 2012

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Tutkimuksessa paneudutaan afrikkalais-amerikkalaisen kirjallisuuden alan teokseen *The Life and Times of Frederick Douglass* (1892), joka on Frederick Douglassin omaelämäkerrallinen kertomus orjuudesta sekä taistelusta orjuutta ja mustien syrjintää vastaan. Tutkimuksen tavoitteena on analysoida, miten valkoisten amerikkalaisten mielivaltaisen vallankäytön paljastaminen ja kuvaaminen orjuuden aikakautena näyttäytyy jälkikoloniaalisena vastakertomuksena valkoisen ylivoiman sekä mustien orjien alistamisen vastustamisessa.

Tutkimuksen teoreettisena viitekehyksenä käytetään sekä jälkikoloniaalista että afrikkalais-amerikkalaista kirjallisuudentutkimusta. Tutkimuksessa pyritään tuomaan esiin yhteys näiden teoriasuuntausten välillä, jolloin afrikkalais-amerikkalainen näkökulma yhdistetään jälkikoloniaalisiin näkökulmiin. Teoriaosuuden keskeisenä tavoitteena on osoittaa, että Yhdysvaltain mustien orjien yhteiskunnallinen asema muistutti sitä sorrettujen kansojen asemaa, joka vallitsi eurooppalaisten imperiumien valloittamilla alueilla. Tällöin myös afrikkalais-amerikkalaisesta kirjallisuudesta voidaan löytää teemoja, joita jälkikoloniaalinen kirjallisuus yleisesti käsittelee.

Tutkimuksen analyysiosio nostaa esille sen kuinka Douglass erityisesti kuvaa orjien jokapäiväisiä kokemuksia orjuudessa, erityisesti orjien epäinhimillistä kohtelua sekä heihin kohdistuvaa fyysistä väkivaltaa. Douglass korostaa myös orjien moninaisia vastustamisen muotoja, joihin kuuluvat sekä yksilöllinen että poliittinen vastustaminen. Näitä teemoja analysoidaan tutkimuksessa vastakertomuksen keinoina, joiden tarkoituksena on vastustaa ja kyseenalaistaa valkoista ideologiaa, jonka mukaan mustien alistaminen orjuuteen oli oikeutettua ennen Yhdysvaltain sisällissotaa 1860-luvulla.

Avainsanat: Frederick Douglass, orjuus, jälkikoloniaalinen vastakertomus, orjanarratiivi.

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## 1. Introduction

Frederick Augustus Washington Bailey, later known as Frederick Douglass, an American abolitionist, former slave, social activist, editor of the abolitionist newspapers *The North Star* and *Frederick Douglass's Paper*, adviser to President Lincoln and Minister Resident and Consul General to the Republic of Haiti, was born in Talbot County, Eastern Shore, in the state of Maryland in February 1818. Douglass was born in slavery on the home plantation of Colonel Edward Lloyd, of whose property he was. Douglass' master at Col. Lloyd's plantation was Captain Aaron Anthony, called 'Old Master', who, most likely, was also his biological father (Martin 1984, 3).

At the age of eight, Douglass was sent to Baltimore to live with the brother of his master's son-in-law, Hugh Auld, his wife Sophia and their son Thomas, whom Douglass was to take care of. It was here, in Baltimore, that the most remarkable experiences of Douglass' life took place. Under the guidance of Mrs. Auld, Douglass' desire to learn to read and write was awakened. Under the ownership of Mr. Hugh Auld, Douglass also gained his most powerful arguments against slavery and a life-long commitment to the causes of abolition and freedom.

In 1838, Douglass managed to escape from slavery by fleeing to New York, situated then in a free state. His public career as a lecturer for the American Anti-Slavery Society began under the guidance of William L. Garrison in 1841, and, according to Martin (1984, 16), "Douglass became the most important spokesman for blacks, slaves and free, in the United States". As his public career advanced, he published the first of three autobiographies, *A Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, an American Slave*, in 1845. The first was followed by two other autobiographies, *My Bondage and My Freedom* (1855) and *The Life and Times of Frederick Douglass* (1881, revised in 1892). Douglass died soon after the

publication of the revised version of *The Life and Times of Frederick Douglass*, which functions as the primary source of this study. He was buried in New York in February 1895.

Douglass' autobiographies became national bestsellers in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, and, since then, his narratives have established a permanent standing within the African American and white American literary canon. Douglass' success as a social reformer, race leader and a national spokesman and his persistence as a representative American individual have their roots primarily in his essentially American vision of freedom and equality and his liberal humanist values and ideals (Martin 1984, 281). Although becoming a prominent figure in the struggle for 19<sup>th</sup>-century black Americans, Douglass, nevertheless, gained some opposition among his own people, black Americans. In his pursue of the American dream of success and the elevation of American blacks, Douglass failed to recognize and understand the fundamental Africanness of black America. According to Martin (1984, 282), Douglass "underestimated the complexity of both American culture and the Negro's relationship to it. His bourgeois tastes found the rural, folk, and often unpolished quality of black expressive culture, like ecstatic religiosity, sorely wanting". The nearly total absence of Africa is visible also in *The Life and Times of Frederick Douglass*, in which the African roots of Douglass' fellow slaves are barely mentioned.

In the following thesis, it is my intention to discover and analyze the counter-discursive practices and strategies of Frederick Douglass, an American ex-slave, in his autobiography *The Life and Times of Frederick Douglass, Written by Himself* (1892). I will claim that through these strategies he reveals and challenges the ideology of white supremacy which had represented black slaves as socially and intellectually inferior chattel. I will claim that Douglass' counter-discourse not only questions the truth-value of white ideology, but also functions simultaneously as the medium of anti-colonial and antislavery struggle. In brief, counter-discourse refers to various acts of resistance against hegemonic representations,

ideology and values which tend to discriminate and oppress those individuals whose position in society is regarded as marginal in relation to the dominant centre.

Since counter-discourse in relation to colonial resistance is much discussed in the field of postcolonial literary studies, one of the theoretical tools I will be employing in my thesis will be drawn from postcolonial studies. In addition, since the tradition of African American autobiographical writing has, as its primary focus, resistance against the dominant discourses of slavery and racial representation of black slaves, I will discuss postcolonial counter-discourse also in relation to African American studies.

The structure of my thesis will be constructed in the following manner: the theory section of the thesis will be divided into two subchapters. In the first subchapter, I will introduce the theoretical field of postcolonial studies, define some key terms relevant in the field and then move on to discuss the imperial status and the colonial legacy of the United States. The second subchapter will be dedicated to a discussion on the notion of counter-discourse and to the development of the African American slave narrative tradition as a specific form of black resistance in the United States.

The analysis section of the thesis will be divided into two chapters. In the first chapter, I will discuss Douglass' representation of the life of the slaves. This chapter will include the representation of the dehumanized status of the black slave in racialized society emphasized by the depiction of physical violence. Here I will also discuss how Douglass humanizes his race by narrating the black slave mother as affectionate and caring. In the second chapter of the analysis I will concentrate on the different forms of black resistance in Douglass' text. In this part, I will discuss how Douglass narrates himself as an active agent of his own life as a free man by emphasizing the importance of self-development and self-reliance.

## **2. Postcolonial Counter-discourse and the African American Slave Narrative Tradition**

In this chapter, it is my aim to provide the theoretical tools necessary for discussing and analyzing the counter-discursive strategies that the former American slave Frederick Douglass employs in his slave narrative *The Life and Times of Frederick Douglass*. Since counter-discourse is a concept that has played an important role in anti-colonial resistance struggles in formerly colonized societies, I will explore the vast field of postcolonial studies focusing on postcolonial textual resistance. Another field of study, which will provide me with proper tools for studying an African American slave narrative, is African American studies. I will not discuss the theoretical fields as two separate areas of study. Instead, I will address the possibilities that postcolonial and African American studies can offer to each other in thematic, ideological and conceptual terms. The strengths and peculiarities of both fields work well in consideration of colonial experiences, anti-colonial and anti-slavery struggles and issues on race and racism, all of which will be essential topics of my thesis.

### **2.1. Postcolonial Studies and Postcolonial America**

In this chapter, I will provide an overlook of the field of postcolonial studies, define some key concepts and direct my discussion towards postcolonialism in American context. The aim here is to ponder upon why it is relevant to study an African American slave narrative from a postcolonial point of view and why it is possible to discuss America as a postcolonial nation.

Postcolonial studies is a vast and interdisciplinary field which often critically examines the tensions between a metropolitan centre and its (former) dependents. At the core of postcolonial studies lies a forceful critique of Eurocentric ideology and the effects of hegemonic rule on the culture, politics, morals and values of the victims of colonialism

(Bertens 2008, 159-160 and McLeod 2000, 32). From the point of view of literature, postcolonial studies has directed critical interest towards the ideological foundations of European hegemonic thinking inherent in English canonical works. Moreover, as, for example, Bertens (160) states, postcolonial literary criticism studies the cultural effects of displacement resulting from colonial conquests, and also instances of resistance that the displaced, victimized and marginalized peoples have performed in various ways.

Before different forms of postcolonial resistance can be discussed and analyzed in specific literary contexts, it is important to make theoretical and, to some extent, lexical distinctions between terms that even postcolonial critics often use indiscriminately. Since the boundaries between the terms ‘imperialism’, ‘colonialism’, ‘neocolonialism’, ‘post-colonialism’ and ‘postcolonialism’ have occasionally become blurred, it is necessary to establish what these terms actually refer to. The terms ‘imperialism’ and ‘colonialism’ are sometimes used interchangeably in critical discussion, which would imply a synonymous relationship between them. Imperialism and colonialism cannot fully be separated from each other since both can, in broad terms, be understood as involving subordinating and oppressive practices on behalf of a dominating institution upon an often indigenous people. However, imperialism and colonialism can perhaps be best understood in consideration of their different functions, to which Young (2001, 16-17) offers a systematic explanation by defining imperialism as a structure where an empire is “bureaucratically controlled by a government from the centre, and which [is] developed for ideological as well as financial reasons”. Colonialism, then, in Young’s terms, refers to a structure where an empire is “developed for settlement by individual communities or for commercial purposes by a trading company”. In other words, as Young further explains, imperialism employs the spread of ideology and political power of the metropolitan centre, whereas colonialism should be seen more as the practice of imperialism away from the centre in the margins. Likewise, Ania Loomba



elaborates on ‘imperialism’ and ‘colonialism’ in *Colonialism/Postcolonialism* (1998, 6) and argues that imperialism cannot merely be defined “as a political system in which an imperial centre governs colonised countries” but rather as a global “economic system of penetration and control of markets”, which thus explains why America, for example, can be regarded as a modern imperial nation given the fact that its position as a global superpower both in economic and military spheres provides an example of the function of an imperial power without any form of colonization.

‘Colonialism’ for Loomba (2) then refers to “the conquest and control of other people’s lands and goods”, and one of the overarching characteristics of colonialism contains “*unforming* or re-forming the communities that existed [in the colonised regions] already, and involved a wide range of practices including trade, plunder, negotiation, warfare, genocide, enslavement and rebellions”. Although such single-sentence definitions of colonialism are not, perhaps, sufficient enough to convey the concept in its complexity, Loomba’s definition makes clear that the distinction between imperialism and colonialism lies in the fact that imperialism survives even after the colonial period has officially ended and, hence, imperialism does not need colonies in order to exist.

The prevalent nature of imperialism also allows for the thinking of the term ‘neo-colonialism’. Since, as is pointed out by Loomba (5-6), direct rule over colonies is not required for imperialism, the term ‘neo-colonialism’ or ‘neo-imperialism’ can be used to refer to the situation where an economic and social relationship of unequal dependency and control remains even after formal decolonization. Thus, as McLeod (89) puts it, the newly formed administration continues to exploit the people by making “the new nation economically subservient to the old colonial Western power by allowing big foreign companies to establish themselves in the new nation, by continuing to send raw materials abroad for profit rather than feeding the people, by making the nation into a tourist centre for wealthy Westerners.” In

other words, imperialism might exist even without territorial control, or, in case the empire used to occupy foreign areas, the controlling influence of the empire prevails even after the empire has lost its colonies.

Returning to the elaboration of imperialism and colonialism, it is safe to assume that neither can be defined along such simplistic and homogeneous lines as was discussed earlier. As Young (17) notes, historically viewed, both imperialism and colonialism have constituted various realizations throughout history depending on different needs and agendas of the empires. For example, he establishes how varied the colonial practices were in those colonies which were primarily established as settlements such as the United States and Australia, compared to colonies such as American Puerto Rico or British India, which served purely as targets of economic exploitation without permanent settlements. In addition, considering the colonial practices in strategically and militaristically significant colonies such as Guantánamo, Gibraltar or Cyprus, it is safe to say that by imperialism and colonialism several instances and different kinds of practices can be understood.

Now that some of the key concepts in the field of postcolonial studies have been defined and discussed, moving on to considering the complex and by no means unified concept of postcolonialism is possible and also relevant. A rather straightforward and comprehensible approach to the concept is to look at it firstly from two perspectives: in historical and intellectual contexts. As the prefix *post* in 'postcolonialism' suggests, postcolonialism is in one sense understood in temporal terms tied to historical circumstances. Post-colonialism<sup>1</sup> in this sense is seen as a period coming after colonialism, which also suggests a connection to the historical events nowadays referred to as 'decolonization'. McLeod (9) divides the process of decolonization of the British Empire into three major events, which mark the demise of the British Empire starting with the declaration of American independence in 1776, when Britain

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<sup>1</sup> The use of the hyphen is intentional since it emphasizes the function of the prefix making it a grammatical marker of time.

lost its colonies in America. The second stage in the process took place around the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> and the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> centuries when the so called white settler nations, Australia, New Zealand, Canada and South Africa became Dominions, i.e. practicing their own form of self-government, yet still recognizing Britain as the ruling ‘mother country’. The last phase in the process of decolonization began at the end of the Second World War consisting of numerous struggles for national independence in the British colonies in South Asia, Africa and the Caribbean.

Although the process of decolonization is often represented along such historical lines as was provided in the discussion above, decolonization does not occur only as a series of events that take place in a specific period of history – this is what some critics, as Loomba (7), call ‘formal decolonization’. However, the process of decolonization must also be understood as a process of complex social, political and cultural developments, which have far-reaching consequences on issues such as reading, writing, thinking and representing national and ethnic identity. It is even relevant to argue that decolonization, as well as colonialism in the form of neo-colonialism, as was discussed above, has not been completed at all in some parts of the world. McLeod, for instance, (32-33) reminds of the contradictions involving the use of the term ‘post-colonial’ since many of the once-colonized peoples, such as African Americans and Australian Aboriginals, are still living in colonial relations to their former colonizers. In addition, Loomba (7) for example, suggests an approach to colonialism, decolonization and postcolonialism according to which “unequal relations of colonial rule are reinscribed in the contemporary imbalances between ‘first’ and ‘third’ world nations. The new global order does not depend upon direct rule. However, it does allow the economic, cultural and . . . political penetration of some countries by others. This makes it debatable whether once-colonised countries can be seen as properly ‘postcolonial’”. This multifaceted definition of postcolonialism by Loomba is useful in consideration of the different and contested opinions,

often avoiding any single-sentence definitions, about what is meant by postcolonialism. In fact, many critics (e.g. Gandhi 1998, viii, Loomba, xii) point out that the heterogeneity of the concept is in many ways responsible for its “diffuse and nebulous” nature, which contributes to the difficulty of providing any coherent description of it.

Perhaps it would be relevant to discuss postcolonial studies in reference to the analysis of the cultural and political factors that are the consequence of imperialism and various colonial practices. Thus postcolonial studies is an interdisciplinary field, which offers tools for criticism on a wide range of fields such as anthropology, sociology, political science, history, cultural studies and literature. In addition, postcolonial studies has strongly been influenced by other theoretical fields such as poststructuralism, feminism and Marxism. According to Williams and Chrisman (1993, 2), Marxist thinking on postcolonialism contributed most profoundly to the distinction between colonialism and imperialism, “which is now best understood as the globalisation of the capitalist mode of production, its penetration of previously non-capitalist regions of the world, and destruction of pre- or non-capitalist forms of social organisation.” Hence, Marxists were responsible for the expansion that took place in the field of postcolonial studies which started to consider the West’s economic, political and military influence over the rest of the world; basically the situation that was discussed above under the term ‘neo-colonialism’.

Postcolonial literary theory provides one example of the versatility of postcolonial studies. It shows how multifaceted a field it is, since various academic fields have been influenced by it and new critical ways of thinking have sprung from it, postcolonial literary theory as one of them. Prior to the emergence of postcolonial literary theory there was a rising tendency of literary activity in the once-colonized countries. One approach to the emergence of the study of literature produced in the British Empire is offered by McLeod (10-11). He points out the surfacing of what was in the 1950s known as ‘Commonwealth literature’ as the

ancestor of British postcolonial literature, and it was used to describe the literatures produced in English in former British colonies or in the countries where formal decolonization was still in progress. It is important to note that according to this definition, 'Commonwealth literature', as its name suggests, was limited to referring only to those nations belonging to the British Commonwealth of Nations. This meant that, as McLeod (11) states: "neither American nor Irish literature was included in the early formulations of the field. 'Commonwealth literature', then, was associated exclusively with *selected* countries with a history of colonialism".

The early productions of Commonwealth literature were mostly concerned with shaping the interpretations of national and cultural identity of those living in postcolonial societies. However, Commonwealth literature is said to have dealt with rather universal themes concerning "the same occupations with the human condition as did Jane Austen and George Eliot" (McLeod, 15) resembling liberal humanist approaches. Respectively, the early study of Commonwealth literature, i.e. Commonwealth literary criticism, according to Bertens (156-159), mainly "focuses on . . . character development and mostly ignores the historical and cultural context within which they are placed by their creators." A transformation in regard of this critical approach took place because of the influence of the expanding field of postcolonial studies and colonial discourse analysis. Critics such as Frantz Fanon, Edward Said, Ngugi wa Thiong'o, Homi Bhabha and Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak are generally viewed as key figures in the emergence of postcolonial criticism. The publication of their works mainly took place around the 1970's, 1980's and 1990's, with the exception of the publication of Fanon's *The Wretched of the Earth* in 1961.

Edward Said, one of the most influential postcolonial critics, shed light upon the dichotomy of the world into two unequal halves, the West and the East, or the Occident and the Orient, when he in his *Orientalism* (1978) made visible how the West's domination over

the East is based on certain discursive practices which allow the West the means to express racially and culturally defined “truths” concerning the East. Along Said’s insight began a new chapter in colonial and postcolonial thinking, and as Loomba (43) states, “*Orientalism* uses the concept of discourse to re-order the study of colonialism. It examines how the formal study of the ‘Orient’ . . . along with key literary and cultural texts, consolidated certain ways of seeing and thinking which in turn contributed to the functioning of colonial power”. Thus, Said’s *Orientalism* analyses Western modes of representation and perceptions about the Orient, and also how discursive practices are used to maintain and reinforce the West’s power over the East. While creating an illusion of the ‘exotic’, ‘uncivilized’, ‘wild’, and ‘peculiar’ Orient, the West simultaneously, through Orientalist discourse, reconstructs its own image as the fountain of knowledge and culture, the polar opposite of the East. One of Said’s most noted arguments presented in *Orientalism*, which describes the imbalanced nature of global state of affairs, points out that the Orient, its nature, culture, customs, people and ways of life, is very much a creation of the Occident. In other words, the West’s power and influence over the rest of the world allows it to produce (Western) knowledge about the East which is neatly cut out for justifying and legitimizing Western domination. Although Said’s work concentrates on the Middle-East, his thinking is, however, adapted and applied far beyond the scope of that part of the world.

As I have discussed above, postcolonial societies and the experiences of various colonized peoples differ from one another depending on the needs and agendas of the colonizing power. For the purposes of this thesis I will now take a closer look at the characteristics of the white settler nations, among which some critics (McClintock 1992, 295-296), although referring to them as “break-away settler colonies”, also include the United States. As Ashcroft et al. (1989, 17) point out, “[t]he development of national literatures and criticism is fundamental to the whole enterprise of post-colonial studies”, and since the

writers of *The Empire Writes Back* acknowledge that “the American experience and its attempt to produce a new kind of literature can be seen to be the model for all later post-colonial writing” (Ashcroft et al., 16) it is worth elaborating on the different aspects of the postcolonial in the American context. The colonies of the United States, Canada, Australia, New Zealand and South Africa were established as settlements to which people of British descent were sent basically to acquire more living space for the Empire. These so called white settler societies differ from those which were established in order to extract riches and which were mostly situated in tropical regions. The latter ones always involve taking over the lands and goods of the people who were already there, which inevitably involves ethical and moral problems. The settlements, on the other hand, were supposedly established on “untouched soil”, which, however, quickly turned out not to be the case. According to Young (19-20), settlers found themselves in an ambivalent situation where there was confusion about whether they themselves were colonizers or colonized, or both at the same time. Young notes that, as the history of the United States shows, it is a common trait of settler nations first to be placed in the position of the colonized but then quickly to become colonizers themselves. Settlers from Great Britain were one of the largest groups of Europeans to settle in America. This British population was under the rule and influence of the mother country, but fought for their freedom and were ever since engaged in a quest for national self-consciousness and self-assertion. Simultaneously the settlers became the oppressors of the indigenous peoples of the land, and as Young notes (20), instead of seeking for a form of co-existence with the natives or rule them, which would have resulted in mixed or creole societies, the settlers tried to exterminate the original inhabitants. Moreover, the settlers faced a need for slaves or indentured labor to cultivate the lands, and since the indigenous peoples were unsuitable, the problem was solved by importing people mostly from West Africa since the 1650’s, around the time when plantation slavery is said to have emerged (Jarrett 2010, 26). These black

Africans became yet another colonized group on American soil and were “allowed almost no rights, whose forms of social and political organization were removed, and who were therefore comparatively easy to control and to keep separate” (Young, 20).

Much attention in the field of postcolonial studies has been devoted to the legacy of British imperialism, and some critics (Alabi 2005, 37), even frown upon the generally held view of post-colonial literature “as an attempt to grapple with the literatures of societies previously colonized by Britain . . . excluding the United States”. Along the same lines follows King in *Postcolonial America* (2000, 3) when he argues that “[u]nfortunately postcolonial studies has rapidly established a fairly stable canon, one anchored within select thinkers and texts, devoted to Europe and its former colonies, delimited by decolonization, and overly committed to literary and historical perspectives”. However, since the end of the 1990’s and the beginning of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, several studies on U.S. imperialism have been carried out and done so mainly by scholars of American studies. One such study by Rowe (2000) focuses on American cultural narratives which demonstrate the role of cultural works both in the development and critique of U.S. imperial practices outside the borders of the nation and of internal colonization, among which Rowe includes, for instance, “slavery, criminalization, and racism as modes of colonizing African Americans” (5).

Although reading and analyzing American cultural works within the frame of postcolonial theory represents a rather modern approach within the field, King notes (4) that “[p]opular readings of American history have suggested that formative features of the American character and of the United States as a unique nation-state derive from the colonies’ struggle for independence from Great Britain and the subsequent establishment of a sovereign republic. Numerous myths and monuments attest to the significance of decolonization and postcoloniality to American identities and institutions.” King arrives at a threefold interpretation of postcolonial America in which he applies postcolonial theory to draw



attention to the particularities of American culture, locates postcolonial practices and norms within the United States and elaborates how, for example, imbalanced relations inherent to postcolonialism have influenced American identities and institutions.

Since the focus of the thesis is to study literature produced by one of the minority groups internally colonized by the white population of the United States, the African Americans, it is worth pointing out that already Ashcroft et al. note that the 'Black writing' models differ from one another depending on the surrounding culture. They state that there are "very great cultural differences between literatures which are produced by a Black minority in a rich and powerful white country and those produced by the Black majority population of an independent nation" (21). Basically, Ashcroft et al. exclude African American writing from other postcolonial black writing based on different kinds of experience. This is what Gruesser readily criticizes as he states in *Confluences: Postcolonialism, African American Literary Studies and the Black Atlantic* (2005, 10) that "people of African descent, whose presence in the English colonies of North America dates as least far back as 1619, were certainly colonized and, in the process, spatially, linguistically, and culturally dislocated." Gruesser's study makes explicit the connections between postcolonialism and African American literary studies through overlapping and intersecting key elements in both fields. Gruesser notes that the history and birth of black presence in the United States should not be regarded as insignificant to the formation of a national identity and culture, since it certainly involves issues such as internal colonization, domination, oppression, displacement, enslavement, marginalization and colonial resistance. Thus, allowing for an interdisciplinary reading of African American studies and postcolonial theory, both of which are already heavily identified as interdisciplinary fields, intends, according to Gruesser "to highlight the movement of ideas and influences through space and over time, a process comparable to the joining of two or more streams to form a powerful current" (5). The

effort to combine similar elements and areas of concern in, and also to bring down some boundaries between the two fields is, in the light of what was discussed above, beneficial for a deeper understanding of how the relevant issues can be discussed and analysed. Thus, it is my intention in the following subchapter to discuss how postcolonial counter-discourse has functioned as a form of anti-colonial resistance struggle in the African American slave narrative tradition.

## **2.2. Counter-Discourse and the African American Slave Narrative Tradition**

In the following, I will firstly focus on explaining what is meant by the concept of counter-discourse in rather broad and general terms. Then I will further explore how counter-discourse is connected to postcolonial studies, which will be dealt with in a discussion on postcolonial counter-discourse as a form of anti-colonial resistance. The latter part of the chapter is dedicated to a discussion on African American studies, and in particular to the slave narrative tradition which was partly developed for the purposes of anti-colonial resistance among the oppressed and colonized group of black American slaves.

In very general terms, counter-discourse can be defined as a challenging or contesting discourse to an often politically constructed truth-claim. Richard Terdiman's study *Discourse/Counter-discourse: The Theory and Practice of Symbolic Resistance in Nineteenth-Century France* (1985, 12) of the "techniques and practices by which nineteenth-century intellectuals and artists contested the dominant habits of mind and expression of their contemporaries" gives more light to the concept of counter-discourse. Terdiman defines counter-discourse in relation to a dominant discourse by simply referring to it as a passion "to displace and annihilate a dominant depiction of the world". He continues by discussing "[t]he power of discourses – of a culture's determined and determining structures of representation

and practice”. Although Terdiman’s analysis of discursive and counter-discursive practices in the context of nineteenth-century France is anything but relevant in the postcolonial context, it has, however, proved useful for post-colonial discourse theory. Slemon notes that “a discourse like post-colonialism, which runs ‘counter’ to the established canon . . . can very readily appropriate from Terdiman the idea that the sign obtains its meaning in conflict and contradiction and apply it to post-colonial texts and societies” (Slemon 1988, quoted in Ashcroft et al., 167). Terdiman’s analysis also proves the validity and functionality of counter-discourse as the contestation and challenge of all hegemonic representations and dominant master discourses. Likewise, Bamberg and Andrews (2004) study the workings of counter-narratives in very broad cultural contexts in relation to cultural master narratives. They illustrate how the idea of a counter-narrative or counter-discourse can be extended to refer to fairly general acts of resistance against a dominant cultural narrative or modes of culturally formed storylines, which for some reason or other, do not seem to fit with one’s experiences within the culture. As an example they discuss the myth of mothering as one of the most powerful and pertaining master narratives in our culture. Thus, counter-narratives are always created or acted out in relation to the master narratives, and Bamberg and Andrews explain further the dynamics of counter-narratives by asking “[h]ow can we make sense of ourselves, and our lives, if the shape of our life story looks deviant compared to the regular lines of the dominant stories? The challenge then becomes one of finding meaning outside of the emplotments which are ordinarily available. We become aware of new possibilities” (11). Master narratives and their counter-discourse ultimately become important factors when individuals identify themselves as either members of an “in-group” or an “out-group”, whether their life experiences displace them in the margins or in the centre of society. Counter-discourse comes then, eventually, to define an individual, their personality and their position in relation to others. Naturally this does not apply only to the level of the individual.

National and communal resistance struggles against dominant master narratives can become defining and characterizing traits of entire communities and nations.

Before discussing counter-discourse in relation to postcolonial resistance, let us return once more to Said's *Orientalism*. The foundation of Said's argument of the Western supremacy over the Eastern part of the world rests fundamentally upon the notion of representation. Orientalism manifests itself in the way an imperial power, the colonizer, uses colonial discourse in its representation of the colonized, its racial 'Other'. The representation in the form of colonial discourse acts, then, as the medium through which the marginalized, silenced and oppressed voices of the colonized subjects are mastered by the dominant discourse. In order to emphasize the pivotal role of textuality in maintaining colonial authority and discourse, it is worth noting that some critics, such as Gandhi (142), claim that "[t]exts, more than any other social and political product, it is argued, are the most significant instigators and purveyors of colonial power . . . [and therefore] it follows that the textual offensiveness of colonial authority was met and challenged, on its own terms, by a radical and dissenting anti-colonial counter-textuality".

Resistance against colonial authority and colonialist representations has throughout history taken several forms, ranging from violent rebellions to various national movements, especially among black societies across the world. One form of opposition is resistance against a dominant discourse of a hegemonic culture. Societies with a colonial past have throughout the history of imperialism suffered from cultural and literary marginalisation, which means that the literary productions of writers from the colonised countries have been treated as marginal, 'on the periphery', in relation to Western canonical literature. Studying and teaching canonical literature in the colonized countries can be regarded as a strategy to impose and maintain cultural and moral values of superior Western powers, while at the same time it diminishes the value of indigenous cultural productions.

As one response to the marginalization and devaluation of the literatures of ‘the periphery’, postcolonial writers adopted strategies which McLeod (145-147) addresses as contrapuntal re-reading and re-writing classic texts. Essentially, contrapuntal approaches to literary texts mean the adoption of new ways to interpret canonical texts by revealing and unravelling colonial discourse, of which the purpose is to reinforce and implement imperialist values and moral codes. Different critics use different concepts in their references to instances of colonial resistance, but ‘anti-colonial resistance’, ‘counter-textuality’, ‘contrapuntal’ and ‘counter-hegemonic’ approaches and postcolonial ‘counter-discourse’ all, in essence, amount to what Loomba (185) refers to as struggles “to create new and powerful identities for colonised peoples and to challenge colonialism not only at a political or intellectual level, but also on an emotional plane”.

In addition to Loomba’s notion on postcolonial counter-discourse, Helen Tiffin (1995, 95) argues that processes of decolonization in the shape of textual dismantling of Western and hegemonic discourse are necessary ‘hybridised’ in nature. Here Tiffin means that since no pre-colonial condition is recoverable, the formation of national and regional identities in postcolonial societies must be understood as “a dialectical relationship between European ontology and epistemology and the impulse to create or recreate independent local identity” (95). Thus, counter-discursive texts cannot simply replace Western canonical discourse, since it is impossible to escape its influence and legacy. The task then is to discover the underlying assumptions of colonial discourse, expose its operations in maintaining cultural hegemony and bring these assumptions down by revealing inherent cultural and racial structures.

Tiffin also argues that basically all postcolonial writing is engaged in counter-discursive strategies, since “it has been the project of post-colonial writing to interrogate European discourses and discursive strategies from a privileged position . . . to investigate the means by which Europe imposed and maintained its codes in the colonial domination of so much of the

rest of the world” (95). According to Tiffin (95), counter-discursiveness, i.e. “subversive manoeuvres”, is characteristic of postcolonial texts, and she identifies two types of postcolonial counter-discourse: one which re-reads and re-writes canonical texts and one which responds to colonialism in general terms (97). Some fairly known examples of the “canonical counter-discourse” involves texts such as Jean Rhys’s *Wide Sargasso Sea*, which revises Charlotte Brontë’s *Jane Eyre* and William Shakespeare’s *Othello*, and V.S. Naipaul’s *A Bend in the River* responding to Joseph Conrad’s *Heart of Darkness* (Gruesser, 24). Similar readings have also been devoted to some early black autobiographies. Alabi, for instance, studies the slave narratives of Olaudah Equiano, Mary Prince, and Frederick Douglass as counter-discourse to William Shakespeare’s *The Tempest* (49). This thesis, however, offers an interpretation of Douglass’ counter-discourse which regards it as a general response to the discourse of colonialism.

As was briefly discussed above, counter-discourse can be understood as a flexible and far-reaching concept, which stretches far beyond the practices of rewriting English classic texts from a specific postcolonial point of view. Counter-discourse contests, challenges and speaks against the hegemonic representations realized by colonial discourse. This is why the term ‘counter-discourse’ is adapted here, since its undertaking is specifically to ‘counter’ colonial discourse in order to give voice to the margins and to validate the existence of the colonized subjects. For example, the slave narrative tradition developed particularly for this purpose; to let the human voices of black slaves speak so that the appeals against inhuman treatment of slaves could be heard.

Anti-colonial resistance struggles, counter-discourse as part of them, are typically associated with the nationalist stirrings of the twentieth century throughout the colonized black societies in the field of postcolonial studies. Strivings towards cultural and national self-determination expanded into national black resistance movements, which, as Boehmer (2005,

101) states, took up the task of “[m]ixing, upturning, and dismantling negative representations . . . “ in order to “turn the identities ascribed to [colonized Africans] into positive self-images”. This is what the national liberation movement, the French Negritude, formulated by the intellectual pioneers Aimé Césaire and Léopold Senghor, represented in its essence in the 1930s; to unite the dislocated and scattered black peoples around the world by celebrating their shared ancestry and common African origins. Negritude basically emphasized and rejoiced African culture, life style, art, languages and peoples while contesting colonialist discourse that repeatedly represented blackness as savage and inferior. Basically Negritude responded to the discriminating tendency employed by the white Western world, which had principally permanently tainted the word ’black’ with all its implications. Perhaps one of the most incisive remarks on this phenomenon was uttered in the 1960s by Frantz Fanon in his *Black Skin, White Masks* (2008, 92) when he discovered the fact of blackness being “deafened by cannibalism, backwardness, fetishism, racial stigmas, [and] slave traders”.

Apart from nationalist movements across colonized black societies, such as Negritude in the 1930s, textual resistance to colonialism, colonialist discourse, racism and oppression constitutes a large volume of postcolonial writing, as was discussed above. Likewise, internal colonization, which was performed on US blacks since the beginning of the Atlantic slave trade, had a profound influence on the development of the tradition of African American autobiographical writing in the United States. It could also be argued that resistance to colonialism and its by-products, such as racism and representations of race, form a common topic for the writings of all black communities in once-colonized societies. In fact, Alabi (1) argues that “Black autobiographies [from Africa, the Caribbean, and the United States] share major continuities like the focus on community and resistance” and also that “[a]s on the African continent, in the African diaspora, autobiographies have been used as a form of

counter-discourse to the dominant discourses of slavery, racism, colonialism, sexism, and classism” (2).

Before entering into a discussion on the peculiarities of the literary tradition of African American autobiographical writing, I will now give an overlook of the critical field of African American studies, within the scope of which studies on African American literature is included. African American or Black studies emerged in the 1960s, when a life long tradition of black people dealing with social struggles such as enslavement, abolition, emancipation and several civil rights activities culminated in the Civil Rights Movement. According to Andrews and Steward (2007, 13-14) the philosophical legacy created by black abolitionists of the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries provided the social and political foundations for African American studies. In its essence, the field critically examines the experiences, achievements, issues and problems of black citizens of the United States, taking into account their ancestral roots of African heritage and also the interrelationship to and co-existence with the white population of the United States and other racial-ethnic groups. Andrews and Steward (5) emphasize the importance of considering the African heritage whenever analysing and studying black people in America. In fact, they state that “[a]ny academically legitimate or valid study of Black people in America must include, to some extent, a study of the customs, characteristics, traditions, languages and mannerisms of the peoples native to the continent of Africa” because those traits are visible in Black Americans even today.

Although mostly referred to as African American Studies, other references, such as Black Studies, African Diaspora Studies, Africana Studies and Africology (Asante and Karenga 2006, ix), point to the vast scope of the field and, depending on the geographical focus, to an examination of people of African ancestry wherever they may be located in the world. In addition, as Harris (2004, 15) notes, “[m]any of the themes of Africana studies are derived from the historical position of African peoples in relation to the Western societies and



in the dynamics of slavery, oppression, colonization, imperialism, emancipation, self-determination, liberation, and socioeconomic and political development". The issues which Black Studies engages itself with correspond largely to the themes of African American literature. As Bertens notes (81-82), racial discrimination and self-definition are recurring themes in African American writing and "that process of self-definition involves a critique of Western representations of Africans and African-Americans, representations that usually repeat the stereotypes that have for instance legitimized colonization".

When considering the early beginnings of black autobiographical writing in the United States, Jarrett traces the beginning to the publication of spiritual autobiographies in the mid-18<sup>th</sup> century, which, already then, were closely connected to anti-colonial resistance struggles. Jarrett claims that

[w]hite as well as black spiritual autobiographers commonly contrasted some form of physical captivity with spiritual freedom. Because evangelicalism was often perceived as critical of, if not hostile to, slavery, the longstanding belief that conversion to Christianity merited emancipation from slavery frequently underlies the emphasis on religion in the inspired black-authored religious narratives. (13)

Although the earliest black-authored narratives addressed the issue of slavery at some level, it is perhaps surprising that, according to Jarrett (16), some of the authors fail to mention the transatlantic slave trade or "slavery is treated from an ameliorationist perspective". However, Olaudah Equiano's *The Interesting Narrative of the Life of Olaudah Equiano, or Gustavus Vassa, the African. Written By Himself*, published in 1789, which became an international bestseller in the pre-1800 era, greatly influenced the development of the slave narrative tradition, because it "offered the first account from the victim's point of view of slavery in Africa, the West Indies, North America, and Britain, as well as of the Middle Passage" (Jarrett, 18). Jarrett notes that "[e]xplicitly an attack on the transatlantic slave trade, *The Interesting Narrative* is also implicitly an assault on slavery. Equiano constructs his argument so as to compel his readers to conclude that slavery must be ended"

(17). In addition, Equiano's narrative is exceptional in the sense that it offered a counter-discursive stance toward the dominant discourse of slavery which, according to Jarrett, before the 19<sup>th</sup> century was a commonly accepted institution with a long history as a part of the social and economic hierarchy (13). Thus, Equiano lead the way of the slave narrative tradition towards its later focus of interest in contesting the generally accepted discourse of slavery.

During the development of African American literary tradition in the 19<sup>th</sup> century the slave's quest for freedom and the abolition of slavery became defining characteristics of slave narrative writing. In fact, Andrews (1986 , xi) states that "the import of the autobiographies of black people during the first century of the genre's existence in the United States is that they 'tell a free story' as well as talk about freedom as a theme and goal of life". Likewise, Stepto (1979, ix) claims that the "primary pre-generic myth for Afro-America is the quest for freedom and literacy". Spirituality inherent in the earliest slave autobiographies is closely linked to the slave narrative's quest for freedom, as Andrews (7) explains: "Before the fugitive slave narrator could have success in restoring political and economic freedom to Afro-Americans, the black spiritual autobiographer had to lay the necessary intellectual groundwork by providing that black people were as much chosen by God for eternal salvation as whites". Andrews continues that had the black spiritual autobiography not claimed the spiritual rights of African Americans, the influence of the fugitive slave narrative in the struggle for black civil rights around the 1950s would not have been as successful as it eventually turned out to be.

The act of writing one's own autobiography developed into a symbolic representation of the quest for freedom for the black slave. The reason why literacy and learning to read are such important images in basically all slave narratives, is that besides it being forbidden, literacy, for the enslaved black person, meant an upliftment from ignorance to wisdom, and a

pathway from slavery to freedom, since “literacy was to be found the sole sign of difference that separated chattel property from human being” (Gates 1988, 165). In addition, the mastery of letters enabled the black slave to justify his existence and prove his value as a human being in the white dominated society. Thus, self-definition and self-representation in the form of writing became immensely important and recurring themes in early African American literary tradition. According to Gates (167), for blacks, the act of writing itself functioned as a signifier against the common representation of the blacks “as the lowest of the human races or as first cousin to the ape”. Writing in the beginning of the 19<sup>th</sup> century was regarded as a sign of difference between animals and humans, and, as Gates (167) states, the publication of black autobiographies “constituted a motivated, and political, engagement with and condemnation of Europe’s fundamental figure of domination”.

During the first century of African American slave narrative writing, from around 1760 to 1865, the primary aims of the genre were to prove to the often suspicious, racist and even hostile white audience that the slave was an equal peer to the white readers of slave narratives, and secondly, that the black author was a reliable truth-teller of the experiences of black people and of the peculiarities of the institution of slavery. Thus, self-affirmation and authenticity became defining characteristics which directed the formation of the genre for a long period of time. Many black narrators realized that they would have to develop specific literary strategies in order to convince the white readers of his or her sincerity, credibility, and moral and intellectual equality. One such strategy involved the inclusion of introductory comments by a white amanuensis on the integrity of the black narrator and on the truthfulness of the author’s status as a slave (Jarrett, 15). In other cases the actual writer of the slave’s tale was not necessarily the real author of the narrative, but again a white amanuensis, who “transcribed and edited the *author*’s oral account, and published it as an as-told-to tale” (Jarrett, 11; emphasis in original). The first recorded slave narrative to introduce the framing

comments of a white amanuensis, was the narrative of James Albert Ukawsaw Gronniosaw (1772) (Jarrett, 14). According to Jarrett (11), the slightly differing agendas of the white writer may help explain why some of the earliest slave narratives were curiously reticent about the transatlantic slave trade and about the institution of slavery itself.

For the first century of African American slave narrative writing the records of the experiences of slaves and their eyewitness accounts of slavery were mostly constructed by simply listing the facts of the slave's life in a what-where-when manner in order to satisfy the curiosity of the white audience about the institution of slavery and of the soul of the black slave. According to Andrews (33), black autobiographies such as *A Narrative of the Most Remarkable Particulars in the Life of James Albert Ukawsaw Gronniosaw, An African Prince* (1772) and the *Narrative of the Life and Adventures of the Lord's Wonderful Dealings with John Marrant, A Black* (1785) are representative of the early forms of slave narrative writing. It was assumed that "the black first-person narrator was a shallow intellectual vessel whose capacity would be strained by more than the oral relation of simple facts about his life" and that the slave's narration always needed to be completed by the white reader's ability to create meaning on the basis of the mere facts (Andrews, 33).

However, a notable change in the literary pursuits of black autobiography occurred in the 1840's and 1850' along with the publications of the prominent fugitive slave narratives of Henry Watson, Lewis and Milton Clarke, William Wells Brown, Josiah Henson and Frederick Douglass (Andrews, 97). The narratives of these fugitive slaves expressed, in a manner never before seen in earlier slave narratives, "individual authorial personality" and "a distinctive authorizing voice" (Andrews, 98-99). Authors like Douglass and Brown no longer assumed mere second-hand roles in the formulation of their life stories, but announced individualism and self-sufficiency in a manner which fitted quite well in the transcendentalist atmosphere of pronounced individualism. In fact, according to Andrews (98) the transcendentalist activists

Theodore Parker and Margaret Fuller, among others, “embraced and celebrated the fugitive slave as a kind of culture-hero who exemplified the American romance of the unconquerable ‘individual mind’ steadily advancing toward freedom and independence”. The reasons behind the development and the transformation of the slave narrative tradition are not obvious, but Jarrett suggests that African American writers gained increasing political, economic, and artistic support from the anti-slavery circles because of a growing conflict on the issue of slavery throughout the United States (103). Moreover, as Jarrett states, besides the support of the anti-slavery movement, advances in literacy, print technology, and distribution made it easier for the black narrator to publish their stories. Another important factor contributing to the steady development of the tradition involved an increased literary and ideological activity between the African American writers and white authors of the 1850’s (104).

Not only were slave narratives such as Douglass’ *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, an American Slave* (1845) ideologically appealing to white Americans, the transformed genre of the slave narrative gained credit and attention also on behalf of its developed rhetorical and narrative skills. Andrews (99) suggests that the reason for the development was based on the fugitive slaves’ active participation in the abolitionist lecture circuit. Frederick Douglass, for example, gave public anti-slavery speeches and lectures for four years under the guidance of the leader of the American Anti-Slavery Society, William Lloyd Garrison, before the publication of *The Narrative* (Andrews, 100). The experience gave Douglass the opportunity to refine his ways of self-representation, modes of address, uses of idiomatic language and expressive style which would be most appealing to the white audience for the cause of abolition. However, despite the success and favour of Douglass’ narratives and persona, even the most skilled slave narrators had to face the American reality of racism and scepticism, in that, according to Andrews (99), none of them might never have been able to share their stories in such a grand scale without the “moral rationale” and “international

audience” provided by the white anti-slavery movement. According to Martin (1984, 23) “[the] ostensible concern [of Douglass’ abolitionist mentors] was that if he continued to do more than narrate and denounce the evil of slavery, his authenticity as a former-slave-turned-abolitionist would be undermined and eventually destroyed.” The prevailing race prejudice even among the abolitionist circles eventually lead to a break between Douglass and the Garrisonians. In fact, as Martin (x) notes, one of the most troubling dilemmas of black intellectuals of the 19<sup>th</sup> century like Douglass was “how to square America’s rhetoric of freedom, equality, and justice with the reality of slavery, inequality and injustice”.

### **3. Representing the Life of the Slaves**

The analysis section of this thesis will consist of two chapters, in the first of which the representation of the everyday life of the slaves living on the same plantation with Frederick Douglass is analyzed. The first analysis chapter is divided into two subchapters, the first of which will concentrate on the dehumanizing treatment of slaves, and the second on descriptions of physical violence on the plantation. According to the primary argument of this thesis, Douglass’ depiction of the inhuman treatment of slaves, the dehumanized status of blacks in a white dominated society, and physical violence towards the American slaves function as counter-discourse in Douglass’ anti-slavery propaganda and in his struggle against black oppression in 19<sup>th</sup>-century America. Therefore, these issues, in *The Life and Times of Frederick Douglass*, are considered as of primary importance for the purposes of this thesis.

In his general observations about the conditions, rules, routines and incidents that were the main ingredients of Douglass’ childhood experiences on the plantation, roughly from 1824 until 1836, Douglass succeeds in relating his thoughts in a way which would awaken the sympathies of the contemporary white readers and raise troubling questions about the

morality and integrity of the slave system. The plain truth told about the downgraded condition of the American slave accompanied by the intimate reactions of young Douglass to the cruelties that he must witness and by Douglass' deep understanding of the order of the slave system provide strong arguments against slavery and the oppression of blacks in 19<sup>th</sup>-century America.

### **3.1. Humanizing and Dehumanizing the Black Slaves**

In this subchapter I will discuss the ways in which Douglass depicts his experiences in slavery both as an eyewitness and as a victim of the cruelties that the slaves were exposed to on the plantation. The experiences depicted here are related to the issues of family and the slaves' origin, and to the everyday living conditions of the slaves. These issues represent factors in slave life which were regularly deprived of them or which helped establish the slaves' inferior status in white dominated society. Douglass' experiences of these issues, thus, illustrate how the system of slavery worked to deprive the slaves of their humanity and to reduce them to commodities. At the same time, however, Douglass emphasizes the humanity of the slaves, such as motherly affection and intimate suffering, in order to resist white domination.

Roughly one third of the African American slave narrative *The Life and Times of Frederick Douglass* is dedicated to the account of Douglass' early childhood experiences in slavery and to an exhaustive description of his awakened curiosity towards learning to read and write with the consequence of becoming aware of the unjust quality of the slave system. The narrative begins with Douglass' speculation about the date of his birth, or more precisely, about the lack of its certainty. A minor, however significant, detail about one of many deprivations concerning slaves is introduced to the reader from early on, namely the lack of knowledge of a slave's full identity. Douglass reports that it was highly uncommon for a slave

to have precise knowledge of the date of birth, not to mention of the identity of the father: “A person of some consequence in civilized society, sometimes designated as father, was, literally unknown to slave law and to slave practice. I never met with a slave in that part of the country who could tell me with any certainty how old he was. Few at that time knew anything of the months of the year or of the days of the month” (2003, 11). The question of identity is an essential theme of all autobiographical texts, since the narratives tend to focus on the individual itself. Similarly, the speculation about identity is a common trait of the slave narrative tradition. The lack of knowledge concerning the biological origin or kinship of the slaves is not surprising, if one thinks about the workings of the slave system. It was the custom in many slave communities to separate slave children from their mothers and to break all family ties. Such was the case of Douglass as well. In fact, Chadler (2002, 102) speculates that one of the major themes in Douglass’ narrative is to reveal how slavery destroys families, and Douglass accomplishes this by announcing that he “never knew his father and barely knew his mother”. In addition, Douglass’ reasoning behind the general course of action executed by the white slaveholders both questions their moral integrity and, also, emphasizes the importance of family ties to the slaves: “The practice of separating mothers from their children and hiring them out at distances too great to admit of their meeting, save at long intervals, was a marked feature of the cruelty and barbarity of the slave system; but it was in harmony with the grand aim of that system, which always and everywhere sought to reduce man to a level with the brute. It had no interest in recognizing or preserving any of the ties that bind families together or to their homes” (2003, 12). In other words, Douglass condemns the way in which slaveholders had the right and the power to break up families and deprive children from their mothers. Inevitably, revelations such as these would raise the sympathies of many, especially those of Christian readers, for whom the idea of family would be intimate and even sacred.



The general uncertainty of parentage and the implied deprecation of and a longing for motherly affection is followed by a description of Douglass' mother. About her Douglass had only few early recollections which, however, are told in such a manner as to signify mutual respect and tenderness between the two:

My only recollections of my own mother are of a few hasty visits made in the night on foot, after the daily tasks were over, and when she was under the necessity of returning in time to respond to the driver's call to the field in the early morning. These little glimpses of my mother, obtained under such circumstances and against such odds, meager as they were, are ineffaceably stamped upon my memory. She was tall and finely proportioned, of dark, glossy complexion, with regular features, and amongst the slaves was remarkably sedate and dignified. (2003, 12)

The fact that Douglass' mother, Harriet Bailey, lived and worked on another plantation, which was located at a considerable distance from where Douglass himself grew up, describes quite well the situation of the slave community. The short description of the efforts and sacrifices that were required of Douglass' mother to see her child even occasionally, speaks on behalf of a slave woman's commitment to and affection for her offspring. In other words, Douglass stresses the meaning of the connection between a mother and a child in his narrative.

Douglass reports another similar incident which also reveals the mother's importance to

Douglass' later development:

My mother had walked twelve miles to see me, and had the same distance to travel over again before the morning sunrise. I do not remember ever seeing her again. Her death soon ended the little communication that had existed between us, and with it, I believe, a life full of weariness and heartfelt sorrow. . . I have since learned that she was the only one of all the colored people of Tuckahoe who could read. . . In a view of this fact, I am happy to attribute any love of letters I may have, not to my presumed Anglo-Saxon paternity, but to the native genius of my sable, unprotected, and uncultivated mother – a woman who belonged to a race whose mental endowments are still disparaged and despised. (2003, 18)

Here it can be noted that it was a great revelation to Douglass and a great advantage, as well, to learn about his self-taught, intelligent and self-sufficient mother. It can be assumed that Douglass was quite eager to write about this aspect in his mother, for it makes a strong

case for his later abolitionist rhetoric on racial equality and the elevation of the blacks. In this light it is noteworthy to consider the way in which Douglass writes about the relationship between slavery and fatherhood, consequently referring to his own situation as well: “Of my father I know nothing. Slavery had no recognition of fathers, as none of families. That the mother was a slave was enough for its deadly purpose. By its law the child followed the condition of its mother. . . The father might be a white man, glorifying in the purity of his Anglo-Saxon blood, and the child ranked with the blackest of slaves. Father he might be, and not be husband, and could sell his own child without incurring reproach, if in its veins coursed one drop of African blood” (2003, 13).

Another memory of the few interactions with his mother relates an emotional incident in Douglass’ life. Being only six or seven years old at the time, Douglass was yet too young to work on the field and he spent the early years with other young slaves under the supervision of Aunt Katy, a cruel and vicious slave woman. Occasionally, Aunt Katy was in the habit of making young Douglass go without food for long periods of time, and once, in such a situation, he remembers his mother rushing to him and taking care of him in an hour of need:

The friendless and hungry boy, in his extremest need, found himself in the strong protecting arms of his mother. . . I shall never forget the indescribable expression of her countenance when I told her that Aunt Katy had said she would starve the life out of me. There was deep and tender pity in her glance at me, and, at the same moment, a fiery indignation at Aunt Katy, and while she took the corn from me, and gave in its stead a large gingercake, she read Aunt Katy a lecture which was never forgotten. (17)

The incident had a profound impact upon Douglass’ sense of self and sense of identity: “That night I learned as I had never learned before, that I was not only a child, but somebody’s child. I was grander upon my mother’s knee than a king upon his throne” (2003, 17-18).

Thus, the reader is, early on already, introduced to the hardships and sorrows of even the youngest of slaves caused by the slave system. Relating these incidents of suffering and starvation of slave children provides strong arguments against the slave system. In addition,

Douglass uses emotional language and concentrates on emphasizing sentimental experiences such as motherly love, childhood starvation and deprivation of origin. The emotional recollections of Douglass experiencing few moments of caring motherly love are also in concordance with the often used strategy of the abolitionists, who “claimed the institution of the family as its guiding ideal and the protection of the domestic well-being of black slaves as one of its chief reasons for existence (Andrews 1986, 242). Thus, Douglass seeks to show to the white readers the deeply humane feelings, emotions and desires of blacks; that black slaves, exactly as the white members of the slaveholding community, experience love, hate, sorrow and pain. Such highly intimate and humane experiences of slavery were especially cut out for revealing the depressing conditions that slaves had to endure in slavery. Doing so was of the utmost importance for the cause of abolition, for, as is remarked by Douglass as well, the harsh reality of slavery was kept hidden from outsiders, and to the public eye, an image of general well being was readily displayed: “Viewed from Col. Lloyd’s table, who could have said that his slaves were not well clad and well cared for? Who would have said that they did not glory in being the slaves of such a master? Who but a fanatic could have seen any cause for sympathy for either master or slave?” (2003, 36). Douglass reports that it was a custom among slaves not to make any complaints to outsiders of the slave community about their conditions or the conduct of the master, for such remarks would most likely be met with heavy punishment: “They would suppress the truth rather than take the consequences of telling it, and in doing so they would prove themselves a part of the human family. I was frequently asked if I had a kind master, and I do not remember ever to have given a negative reply” (2003, 39).

In *The Life and Times*, Douglass provides an extensive description about the general living conditions and the daily routines on Col. Lloyd’s plantation. The description enables the reader to become acquainted with the reality of slave life and provides a glimpse into the

interior of one of the largest slave plantations in the state of Maryland at the time. In order to assure the reader that despite being situated in one of the northern states of the United States<sup>2</sup>, where “[p]ublic opinion was, indeed, a measurable restraint upon the cruelty and barbarity of masters, overseers, and slavedrivers, whenever and wherever it could reach them” (Douglass 2003, 18), the home plantation of Col. Lloyd in Talbot County happened to be one of the “secluded and out-of-the-way places . . . seldom visited by a single ray of healthy public sentiment, where slavery, wrapt in its own congenial darkness, could and did develop all its malign and shocking characteristics, where it could be indecent without shame, cruel without shuddering, and murderous without apprehension or fear of exposure or punishment” (Douglass 2003, 18-19). With this introduction Douglass places his home plantation among the notorious slave plantations of the southern states, where slavery was known to exist in its cruelest form. Douglass, thus, points out that chattel slavery, a condition which he ruthlessly describes:

Men and women, young and old, married and single; moral and thinking human beings, in open contempt of their humanity, leveled at a blow with horses, sheep, horned cattle, and swine. Horses and men, cattle and women, pigs and children – all holding the same rank in the scale of social existence, and all subjected to the same narrow inspection, to ascertain their value in gold and silver – the only standard of worth applied by slaveholders to their slaves. Personality swallowed up in the sordid idea of property! Manhood lost in chattelhood! (2003, 61)

was not solely the problem of the South.

As to the actual living conditions of the slaves on Col. Lloyd’s plantation, of these Douglass gives a thorough and exhaustive account. His experiences are contradicted by the general boastings of slaveholders that the slaves were well taken care of and “enjoyed more of the physical comforts of life than the peasantry of any country in the world” (2003, 32). The

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<sup>2</sup> In 1821, there were 12 states in which slavery was banned. These states were referred to as the “free states” in contrast to the “slave states”, and they were situated in the northern part of the US. The 12 slave states in the South included Missouri, Kentucky, Virginia, Maryland and Delaware which formed a “border” between the free states of the North and the slave states of the South.

monthly allowance of food admitted to the slaves is carefully related, as well the quality of it. The amount of food is then compared to the physical strain executed by the slaves on a daily basis: “this was the monthly allowance of a full-grown slave, working constantly in the open field from morning till night every day in the month except Sunday” (2003, 33). The slaves’ clothing is given as much attention as the scanty amount of food. One by one, Douglass (2003, 33) demonstrates the kind and quality of the slaves’ attire: “It consisted of two tow linen shirts, one pair of trousers of the same coarse material, for summer, and a woolen pair of trousers and a woolen jacket for winter, with one pair of yarn stockings and a pair of shoes of the coarsest description. Children under ten years old had neither shoes, stockings, jackets, nor trousers”. Douglass (2003, 44) remembers how he himself, as a small boy, suffered from the depravity of food and clothing: “the great difficulty was to keep warm during the night. The pigs in the pen had leaves and the horses in the stable had straw, but the children had no beds. . . I slept generally in a little closet, without even a blanket to cover me. In very cold weather I sometimes got down the bag in which corn was carried to the mill, and crawled into that. . . My feet have been so cracked with the frost that the pen with which I am writing might be laid in the gashes”. The overall description of misery continues with a depiction of the sleeping arrangements of the slaves and the general hardship of their days’ work: “As to beds, they had none. One coarse blanket was given them, and this only to the men and women. The children stuck themselves in holes and corners about the quarters, often in the corners of huge chimneys, with their feet in the ashes to keep them warm. . . The slaves worked often as long as they could see, and were late in cooking and mending for the coming day, and the first grey streak of the morning they were summoned to the field by the overseer’s horn” (2003, 33).

Relating in such a careful manner the miserable, yet, actual, living conditions of the slaves, Douglass reveals his deep passion for humanity. In his descriptions slaves are often

reduced “to the level of the brute”, and comparisons are drawn between slaves and animals in remarks such as “human stock”, “human cattle” or “an additional pig to his stock”. The reason behind these descriptions is to establish the state of affairs on the slave plantations, reveal the inhuman treatment and conditions of the slaves and point out the immorality and injustice of the entire slave system. By illustrating the dehumanization of the slaves, caused and carried out by the white slaveholding community, Douglass emphasizes the very humanity of the slaves. In reporting of the hardships, sufferings and inhuman conditions and by appealing to humane sentiments, Douglass provides counter-discourse against the institution of slavery that made such treatment legal and permissible in America.

So far it has been established that in his narrative, Douglass points out the conditions in which black slaves lived during American slavery. Douglass’ detailed description of these conditions emphasizes the dehumanized status of the slaves in a white dominated society. At the same time, Douglass draws attention to emotional suffering in slavery, and stresses sentimental issues such as motherly love and the meaning of family. These issues emphasize the human value of the slaves, which is in opposition to the dehumanized treatment and status of the slaves. Douglass is, thus, providing counter-discursive arguments against the practices of the white slaveholding community.

### **3.2. Physical Violence**

This subchapter deals with the issue of physical violence to which Douglass and his fellow slaves were regularly exposed while in slavery. At the same time, the subchapter discusses the description of violence as a counter-discursive strategy in Douglass’ text, because it offers an argument against the slave system and its conventional practices in 19th-century America. As Laurie and Neimeyer (2010, 222) state, physical abuse, exposure to violence and a sense of

loss, humiliation and pain are marked features of the slave experience in all slave narrative texts, however, their portrayal gained considerable meaning during the antebellum era, at the time of Douglass' first publication, because of heightened interests of the abolitionists in the North. In fact, as Clark (1995, 465) notes, the slaves' depiction of violence and suffering became a common device for the antislavery cause, and the stories were gladly made visible by the northern abolitionists. The attitude to the depiction of violence in slave narratives seems to have become more complex after the Civil War and the emancipation in the 1860s. According to Schwalm (2008, 289-290), it is a generally held view that the steadily rising black middle class, during the years after the emancipation and in the following decades, insisted on distancing themselves from the humiliating and downgrading history of slavery, whereas the rest demanded the sustainment of slave memories and experiences. The interest of the rising black middle class to shake off the legacy of slavery is connected to the idea of black elevation or black upliftment, the aim of which was to provide blacks with access to economic success through higher education. Douglass' *The Life and Times* seems to take into consideration both the memory of the slave experience with its humiliation and oppression and the promotion of the intellectual abilities of the blacks. Such a far-reaching vision about the social condition of the African American population in the 19th century is possible, because Douglass' text expands over such a long period of time.

In addition to the detailed description of the living conditions of the slaves on the home plantation of Colonel Lloyd revealing the dehumanized status and treatment of black slaves, Douglass' narrative also gives an account of the slaves' exposure to violence on a regular basis. Numerous eyewitness accounts of floggings, beatings and whippings of the slaves executed by masters and overseers, sparing no women or children, and his personal experiences of violent attacks exemplify the cruelty of the slave system and the violent

character of the slaveholding community of the South. They also allow the reader to sense the atmosphere of fear that was constantly present within the slave community on the plantation.

As it was earlier discussed, the state of Maryland was not the most notorious slave state in the country, and there the public opinion was considered a degree more amiable towards the black slaves than in the states of the deep South. Douglass, however, explains the particularity of Colonel Lloyd's plantation in this respect and states that: "[p]ublic opinion in such a quarter . . . was not likely to be very efficient in protecting the slave from cruelty. To be a restraint upon abuses of this nature, opinion must emanate from humane and virtuous communities, and to no such opinion or influence was Col. Lloyd's plantation exposed" (2003, 19). Douglass makes clear that the slaves, himself included, were not protected from the atrocities of slavery, and that his experiences match with the hardships of those enslaved on the southern plantations.

In his descriptions of the violent and ruthless behavior of the slaveholders, masters and overseers, Douglass attacks, first and foremost, the system of slavery, and not directly the individual executors of violent deeds. Douglass often writes about the "evils of slavery", and the "victims of the slave system". Such discourse is part of Douglass' abolitionist propaganda. He understands that blaming the slaveholding community of the horrible treatment of slaves will not end slavery, since replacing immoral individuals with others solves no problems. However, revealing the "corruptive nature" of the system can make people understand the necessity of abolishing slavery if they see slavery as harmful to their own integrity and morality.

Of the harmfulness and corruptive nature of slavery, Douglass makes an excellent point in his recollections in Baltimore, where he was sent to live under the household of Mr. and Mrs. Auld at the age of eight to run of errands and to take care of their son. At the beginning of his servitude, Douglass describes his new mistress, Mrs. Auld, as "of excellent



disposition”, “kind, gentle, and cheerful” (2003, 47), bearing no signs of “the supercilious contempt for the rights and feelings of others, and the petulance and bad humor which generally characterized slaveholding ladies” (2003, 46-47). Douglass considers the fact that Mrs. Auld had never before been a slaveholder the reason for her good-natured character: “[t]o this fact the dear lady no doubt owed the excellent preservation of her natural goodness of heart, for slavery could change a saint into a sinner, and an angel into a demon” (2003, 48). Douglass describes the attitude of Mrs. Auld towards him as nearly motherly: “[i]f little Thomas was her son, and her most dearly loved child, she made me something like his half-brother in her affections” (ibid.). Likewise, Douglass remembers “the caressing strokes of her gentle hand, soothing him into the consciousness that, though motherless, he was not friendless” (ibid.) However, according to Douglass, the behavior of Mrs. Auld towards him changed when she learned to be a proper slaveholder:

The fatal poison of irresponsible power, and the natural influence of slave customs, were not very long in making their impression on the gentle and loving disposition of my excellent mistress. She at first regarded me as a child, like any other. This was the natural and spontaneous thought; afterwards, when she came to consider me as property, our relations to each other were changed, but a nature so noble as hers could not instantly become perverted, and it took several years before the sweetness of her temper was wholly lost. (2003, 49)

Douglass’ argument here is that slavery has a corruptive impact on everyone who is affected by it. He also emphasizes his personal vision of people as naturally kind and good, and he sees mutual respect and the equal treatment of others as the normal state of affairs. Slavery, however, has distorted that situation: ”nature never intended that men and women should be either slaves or slaveholders, and nothing but rigid training long persisted in, can perfect the character of the one or the other” (2003, 51). Presenting slavery in such a dangerous and unnatural light, Douglass is more likely to gain sympathy and understanding from his white readers than if he had straightforwardly accused the white slaveholders of cruelty and

immorality. Presenting slavery in the way Douglass does could have the effect of making the slaveholding community regard slavery as harmful to themselves.

In Douglass' text, there are several detailed descriptions about the beatings and whippings of slaves, and likewise, many of those recollections are told in such a manner as to establish the institution of slavery as the cause and instigator of atrocious and violent actions. Perhaps the most notorious and most studied event of slave beating in Douglass' text is a scene in which Douglass, as a young child, witnesses the brutal whipping of a female slave, Esther, by their common master, Captain Anthony. Before giving a detailed description of the actual whipping, Douglass provides some background information into the situation, and the reader finds out that the female slave, Esther, had a relationship with another slave, Ned Roberts, and Captain Anthony did not approve of their courtship. Douglass' speculation about the negative attitude of Captain Anthony towards the couple again implies that his actions are actually caused by the evil of slavery, and that it is the institution that has made him such a man he appears to be:

Had Mr. Anthony himself been a man of honor, his motives in this matter might have appeared more favorably. As it was, they appeared as abhorrent as they were contemptible. It was one of the damning characteristics of slavery that it robbed its victims of every earthly incentive to a holy life. The fear of God and the hope of heaven were sufficient to sustain many slave women amidst the snares and dangers of their strange lot, but they were ever at the mercy of the power, passion, and caprice of their owners. Slavery provided no means for the honorable perpetuation of the race. (2003, 27)

In this remark by Douglass, it remains slightly ambiguous whom the "victims" of slavery here refer to who are "robbed" of the possibility to lead respectable lives. It seems that Douglass is referring to both sides of the situation, hence, the female slave, Esther, and her master, Captain Anthony. The remark could, then, be interpreted so that Esther's role is to submit to the mercy of her master, and it is her chance to have an honorable relationship with her loved one that is denied or "robbed" of her. Likewise, Captain Anthony becomes a victim of the

slave system that provides him the power to exercise his malignancy and act upon his primitive instincts, and that it is his opportunity to retain his integrity as an honorable man that is “robbed” of him by the system of slavery. At the same time, Douglass’ remark about the victims of slavery are, again, directed to involve all the people, slaves and masters, who are effected by slavery, and Douglass’ argument is that slavery makes everyone a victim, no matter what the social position.

The actual violent scene of Esther’s whipping, as described by Douglass, deserves a separate analysis. Despite Captain Anthony’s demands to quit the relationship, Esther and Ned continued to meet, and Captain Anthony’s revenge on the disobedience of Esther is described by young Douglass in the following manner:

Esther’s wrists were firmly tied, and the twisted rope was fastened to a strong iron staple. . . Here she stood on a bench, her arms tightly drawn above her head. Her back and shoulders were perfectly bare. Behind her stood old master, cowhide in hand, pursuing his barbarous work with all manner of harsh, coarse, and tantalizing epithets. He was cruelly deliberate, and protracted the torture as one who was delighted by with the agony of his victim. Again and again he drew the hateful scourge through his hand, adjusting it with a view of dealing the most pain-giving blow his strength and skill could inflict. Poor Esther had never before been severely whipped. Her shoulders were plump and tender. Each blow, vigorously lain on, brought screams from her as well as blood. “Have mercy! Oh mercy!” she cried. (2003, 28)

The description related here by Douglass, who, at the time, was hiding in a closet in the kitchen where the incident took place, is told in great detail. Douglass’ careful examination of Captain Anthony’s violent act leaves no room for the speculation or doubt about the inhuman and horrible treatment of black slaves. Through Douglass’ narration it becomes clear that violence was used in order to fully subjugate and physically and mentally oppress the slaves and to decline the humanity of the slaves. The reader also finds out that such brutal whippings, in which a slave is absolutely subjugated by the adopted superiority of the whites, took place on a regular basis, and the executor of the punishments was deliberate and systematic in his actions (Douglass 2003, 28).

The beating, narrated above, had its effects on young Douglass. According to his narration (*ibid.*), the scene left him “terrified, hushed, stunned, and bewildered” and it opened his eyes to the “grosser and more revolting features of slavery” (Douglass 2003, 29), and it made him start to wonder why some people are slaves and others are masters. In his speculation, the reader can detect the first signs of Douglass’ awakening racial awareness. He remembers having told that God had made “black people to be slaves and white people to be masters” (2003, 28). Thus, Douglass was already very early introduced to the idea that skin color was a determining factor in the social order of his community. However, after the whipping of Aunt Esther, he started to question the supremacy and inferiority of people based on racial characteristics. Douglass’ first argument into the matter was his awareness of some black people who were not slaves, but in fact, they were free and lived in the free states. In addition, he mentions hearing about some slaves who had been either brought or stolen from Africa.

As mentioned before, witnessing Aunt Esther’s whipping opened Douglass’ eyes to the violent character of slavery. Thereafter, Douglass carefully narrates other similar incidents of floggings and beatings that occurred on Colonel Lloyd’s plantation. Although physical violence on the plantations was regular, Douglass makes some deliberate choices when he, in a detailed manner, describes the beatings of few selected slaves. One such incident that deserved more attention from Douglass than some other, occurred to a female slave named Nellie who was to be punished by her overseer on the charge of impudence. The reason why Douglass may have chosen to narrate the punishing of this particular woman could be Douglass’ wish that writing about the beating of “a wife and a mother of five sprightly children” (2003, 29) would awaken the sympathies of his white readers, and that it would expose the violent character of a slave overseer and, therefore, subject him to criticism on behalf of the readers. As narrated by Douglass, the beating of Nellie takes place in front of her

children who "gallantly took the side of their mother against the overseer, and pelted him well with stones and epithets" (2003, 30). Douglass continues his narration by describing the struggle of the fighting mother against "the maddened overseer", but the overseer "finally overpowered her and succeeded in getting her arms firmly tied to the tree . . . The victim was now at the mercy of his merciless lash. . . The cries of the now helpless woman, while undergoing the terrible infliction, were mingled with the hoarse curses of the overseer and the wild cries of her distracted children. When the poor woman was untied her back was covered with blood" (ibid.).

According to Douglass, another account in which a helpless slave woman, Douglass' cousin, suffers under the violent attack of her master, occurs when the woman comes seeking shield and protection from Douglass' master, Captain Anthony, against her violent overseer, Mr. Plummer: "The poor girl . . . had traveled twelve miles, barefooted, barenecked, and bareheaded. Her neck and shoulders were covered with scars, newly made, and not content with marring her neck and shoulders with the cowhide, the cowardly wretch had dealt her a blow on the head with a hickory club, which cut a horrible gash, and left her face literally covered with blood" (Douglass 2003, 26). The situation of the latter incident is very similar to the former. In both of the scenes, Douglass narrates a situation in which a helpless female slave is violently abused by a superior white male, who is described as ruthless, brutal and fiendish.

With the descriptions of the helpless slave women and the terrified children at the mercy of the devilish overseers and masters, Douglass continues his narrative tendency of juxtaposing absolute power and aggression of white superiority with the powerlessness and inferiority of the black race. According to Martin (1984, 24) Douglass' recurrent use of white power and black powerlessness serves the function of examining the relations between blacks and whites, and also to criticize "those with a vested interest in the continuation of the uneven

power relationship”, basically meaning the white slaveholding community of the South. In addition to criticism on the southern slaveholding community, according to DeLombard (2001, 246), with the eyewitness accounts of slave beatings and floggings, Douglass creates a vision of “the injured black body to convey the brutality of the South’s peculiar institution”. From this it can be deduced that Douglass’ target audience lies in the North where such depiction of the violent South would find favorable recipients in those in opposition to slavery. Douglass’ narration would, thus, be pure antislavery propaganda. Besides the aims, announced by Martin and DeLombard, Douglass’ narrative style, which tends to illustrate violent and brutal execution of white power and superiority over the oppressed and subjugated black race, also functions as counter-discourse against the alleged and assumed black inferiority. In other words, when Douglass relates his personal experiences of suffering and torture of blacks, albeit from the point of view of an eyewitness, he challenges the ideology of white supremacy by criticizing the inhuman and brutal treatment of black slaves.

In another description by Douglass, instead of occurring to a powerless slave woman, the victim of yet another physical abuse is a slave man, old Barney, “a fine-looking, portly old man of a brownish complexion, and a respectful and dignified bearing” (2003, 36), who was in charge of the well-being of Colonel Lloyd’s horses. The scene of the whipping of old Barney, which according to Douglass was “one of the most heart-saddening and humiliating scenes” (2003, 37) he had ever witnessed, makes the juxtaposition of white supremacy and black inferiority even more pronounced:

These two men [Barney and Col. Lloyd] were both advanced in years; there were the silver locks of the master, and the bald and toil-worn brow of the slave – superior and inferior here, powerful and weak here, but equals before God. ‘Uncover your head,’ said the imperious master; he was obeyed. ‘Take off your jacket, you old rascal!’ and off came Barney’s jacket. ‘Down on your knees!’ Down knelt the old man, his shoulders bare . . . In this humble and debasing attitude, that master, to whom he had devoted the best years and the best strength of his life, came forward and laid on thirty lashes with his horsewhip. The old man made no resistance, but bore it patiently, answering each blow with only a shrug of the shoulders and a groan. (ibid.)

Here the juxtaposition of white superiority and black inferiority, white power and black weakness, is represented and illustrated very strongly and clearly. Douglass narrates the scene carefully and succeeds in pointing out the unjust nature of the power relations between the two men. Douglass' note about the similarity of the two, both of them being of the same age and sharing some features in their appearance, is an allusion to Douglass' vision of racial equality. Thus, Douglass' aim is to illustrate the fundamental sameness of these two individuals, and he emphasizes that sameness by reminding the reader that the Christian God considers them as equals. Douglass' criticism is, then, directed towards the racial inequality that manifests itself in the scene of old Barney's whipping. Not only is the scene forcefully written, so as to attract compassion for the miserable condition of old Barney but the scene is also visually very effective; the inferior and humiliated Barney on the ground on his knees, and, above him, the superior white master standing strong and powerful.

The incidents of violence and descriptions of oppression and suffering described above and narrated by Douglass, have, thus far, been eyewitness accounts, and Douglass himself actually managed to avoid severe physical punishments during his childhood and early teenage years, except for the occasional whipping from his master. However, a change in the situation came when Douglass was hired out by his master to a notorious "negro breaker", Edward Covey, in 1834 "to be broken" (Douglass 2003, 75). Douglass was 16 years old at the time, and, as he notes, so far he was "treated with comparative tenderness" (ibid.). On his way to the farm of the new master, who was known for his "fierce and savage disposition" (ibid.), Douglass reflects upon his experiences in slavery so far in the following manner:

By a law which I can comprehend, but cannot evade or resist, I am ruthlessly snatched from the hearth of a fond grandmother and hurried away to the home of a mysterious old master; again I am removed from there to a master in Baltimore; thence I am snatched away to the Eastern Shore to be valued with the beasts of the field, and with them divided and set apart for a possessor; then I am sent back to Baltimore, and by the time I have formed new attachments and have begun to hope that no more rude shocks shall touch me, a difference arises between brothers, and I am again broken up and sent to St. Michaels; and now from the latter place I am footing my way to the home of

another master, where, I am given to understand, like a wild young working animal I am to be broken to the yoke of a bitter and lifelong bondage. (2003, 76)

The bemoaning of the past and the dread of the yet unknown future summon up Douglass' thoughts in an efficient way. Since these thoughts are reflections in retrospect, the Douglass who wrote them in 1892, after the abolition of slavery and the Civil War, was able to look back upon his situation and fully realize and recognize the predicament of himself and of his race. Writing in the historical circumstances in which the social position of blacks had somewhat improved allows for the criticism of the treatment of his race and, also, for the criticism of legislation.

The notorious Negro breaker, Mr. Covey, is presented and introduced to the reader as an animal-like beast, and Douglass' description of him is structured in the manner to provoke antipathy and loathing towards the master and towards his conduct:

[c]old, distant, morose, with a face wearing all the marks of captious pride and malicious sternness, he repelled all advances. He was . . . short-necked, round-shouldered, of quick and wiry motion, of thin and wolfish visage, with a pair of small, greenish-gray eyes . . . which were constantly in motion, expressing his passion rather than his thoughts. . . The creature presented an appearance altogether ferocious and sinister, disagreeable and forbidding, in the extreme. When he spoke, it was from the corner of his mouth, and in a sort of light growl like that of a dog when an attempt is made to take a bone from him. (2003, 78)

In his narration, Douglass makes explicit that his treatment by Mr. Covey was harsh and cruel: "during the first six months that I was [with Mr. Covey] I was whipped, either with sticks or cowskins, every week. Aching bones and a sore back were my constant companions. Frequent as the lash was used, Mr. Covey thought less of it as a means of breaking down my spirit than that of hard and continued labor. He worked me steadily up to the point of my powers of endurance" (2003, 80). As Douglass relates, Mr. Covey's methods of Negro breaking consisted of regular beatings and primarily of hard labor: "Work, work work, was scarcely more the order of the day than of the night. . . I was somewhat unmanageable at the



first, but a few months of this discipline tamed me. Mr. Covey succeeded in breaking me – in body, soul, and spirit. My natural elasticity was crushed; my intellect languished; the disposition to read departed, the cheerful spark that lingered about my eye died out; the dark night of slavery closed in upon me, and behold a man transformed to a brute!” (2003, 83). In Mr. Covey, Douglass found all the monstrous characteristics of slaveholders, and in describing the details of his behavior Douglass objects to such treatment of slaves.

In addition to the vicious and cruel nature of Mr. Covey, Douglass reveals another repulsive side of the master; as Douglass narrates, Mr. Covey was a poor man and could only afford to “buy one slave; and scandalous and shocking as is the fact, he boasted that he bought her simply ‘as a breeder’” (2003, 82). The woman slave was, thus, forced to reproduce more slaves to Mr. Covey, a fact to which Douglass reacts in the following manner: “[n]o better illustration of the unchaste, demoralizing, and debasing character of slavery can be found than is furnished in the fact that this professedly Christian slaveholder, amidst all his prayers and hymns, was shamelessly and boastfully encouraging and actually compelling, in his own house, undisguised and unmitigated fornication, as a means of increasing his stock” (ibid.). If, with the previous remark, Douglass condemns the conduct of one slaveholder, the following offers a condemnation of the entire slave system: “It was the system of slavery which made this allowable [slave breeding], and which no more condemned the slaveholder for buying a slave woman and devoting her to this life, than for buying a cow and raising stock from her” (ibid.).

As mentioned earlier, before being submitted to the mercies of Mr. Covey, young Douglass had been safe from severe physical violence. His share in this matter was, however, yet to come. Mr. Covey’s first flogging issued to Douglass occurred in the woods, where Douglass was ordered to remove his clothes in order to be whipped more efficiently. To give the reader a general picture of the conditions at Covey’s plantation Douglass narrates the

following: “The reader has but to repeat, in his mind, once a week the scene in the woods, where Covey subjected me to his merciless lash, to have a true idea of my bitter experience during the first six months of the breaking process . . . I am only to give the reader a truthful impression of my slave-life, without necessarily affecting him with harrowing details” (2003, 84-85). With this remark Douglass wishes to provoke the reader to imagine the physical suffering that another man made him endure. In a sense the reader’s imagination is a more powerful tool in offering criticism against the cruel treatment of slaves. Douglass’ personal sufferings of physical abuse also go together with the idea of the “injured black body”, discussed earlier, which seems to reinforce the image of the violent South.

In his narrative, Douglass does not provide detailed descriptions of the occasions when he himself was subjected to the violent floggings. However, the following scene narrated by Douglass as “the last flogging” (2003, 90) is described in great detail “although [he] may seem thereby to applaud [his] own courage”, because there occurred “the change in [his] condition . . . owing to causes which may help the reader to a better understanding of human nature, when subjected to the terrible extremes of slavery” (2003, 85). After a sequence of events which had led Douglass to a point where he “had brought [his] mind to a firm resolve . . . to obey every order, however unreasonable, if it were possible, and if Mr. Covey should then undertake to beat [him] to defend and to protect [himself] to the best of [his] ability” (2003, 94). Indeed, the occasion came when Douglass resulted in fighting, and after the fight was over and Douglass came out of the fight as the winner, Mr. Covey never laid his hand on Douglass again. This is an important development in Douglass’ pathway from slavery to freedom, for, as Kohn (2005, 500) notes, the fight represented a psychological emancipation to Douglass and it secured his manhood. From the moment Douglass decided to stand up for himself against physical oppression, he realized both his full potential as an individual, and that an open rebellion against slavery would provide him the way to freedom and the key to

the liberation of his people: “This battle with Mr. Covey, undignified as it was and as I fear my narration of it is, was the turning-point in my ‘life as a slave.’ It rekindled in my breast the smouldering embers of liberty. It brought up my Baltimore dreams and revived a sense of my own manhood. It recalled to life my crushed self-respect, and my self-confidence, and inspired me with a renewed determination to be a free man. A man without force is without the essential dignity of humanity” (2003, 97). In this remark, Douglass announces perhaps the essence of his future vision of the elevation of the black man from bondage to freedom and to self-sufficiency. Douglass’ vision, then, represents the opposite of white ideology, which regarded the black man as intellectually inferior to rise to social and economic success. In other words, Douglass’ remark functions as counter-discourse to the dominant discourse of white intellectual power. Along with the newly gained self-confidence and self-reliance Douglass becomes in his narrative increasingly committed to verbalizing his opposition. In fact, the individual and communal resistance that Douglass practices in his narrative is the subject of the following chapter.

In short, the chapter introduced Douglass’ depiction of the everyday life of the slaves on the plantations and in different forms of enslavement. As we have seen, the everyday experiences of slaves included inhuman treatment in the form of poor living conditions, breaking up of family ties and exposure to physical violence. These issues amounted to the dehumanizing of black slaves, meaning that the slaves were reduced to the level of chattel and treated and regarded as commodities. In addition, the use of violence illustrated the corruptive nature of slavery both to the slaves and to the slaveholding community. As Douglass revealed the harsh reality of slavery, he also resisted the slave practices which allowed the inhuman treatment of slaves possible. Douglass’ revelations functioned as counter-discourse to the dominant discourse of the white slaveholding community which regarded the inhuman treatment of slaves as acceptable.

## **4. Forms of Black Resistance**

The previous chapter was dedicated to the analysis of Douglass' descriptions of the degraded and miserable conditions of the black slaves in 19th-century America, exemplified by narrating in great detail the everyday life of the enslaved blacks, and accompanied by the constant presence of physical violence. The chapter at hand, however, aims at discussing Douglass' role and influence as a prominent figure of black resistance in 19th-century America, with the primary focus on the pre- and post- Civil war eras. Douglass' intellectual thinking on the issue of race and the social position of his people developed and shaped its course as his own social standing in society changed over time. The differences in his perception are visible during the different stages of his life, and that is why it is necessary to examine how Douglass offers counter discursive resistance against white superiority during the early years of his intellectual awakening, when the resistance is notably individual, and later in his life, when his resistance becomes increasingly political and widespread. Therefore, this chapter on different forms of black resistance is divided into two subchapters; individual and political resistance.

### **4.1. Individual resistance**

Douglass' resistance to white domination and to the enslavement of his race appears, during the first half of *The Life and Times of Frederick Douglass*, to function mainly at the level of the individual, i.e. how Douglass personally defied white superiority and the oppression of blacks, and how he reacted to his enslavement as an individual. Therefore, the subchapter at hand introduces this critical stage in Douglass' life when he begins to become increasingly vocal in his resistance to the enslavement of blacks and to white domination. Since literacy

was a major issue at this stage, it is also a central theme in this subchapter. Literacy played a crucial role in Douglass' intellectual awakening and resulted in a change in Douglass' resistance, and it was a remarkable factor in his identity formation. Thus, the subchapter concentrates on the issue of literacy and its influence on Douglass' individual resistance.

As it was discussed in the theory section, in relation to the conventions of the African American slave narrative tradition, literacy plays an important role in most slave narratives, because learning to read symbolized, for the black slave, the way from ignorance to wisdom and from slavery to freedom. Literate fugitive slaves were keen on emphasizing their reading ability, because literacy provided a justification for their existence in the white dominated society, since the ability to read was regarded as an indicator to distinguish animals from human beings (see 2.2., p. 26-27). In addition, Chander (2002, xiv) argues that the African American slave narratives were "carefully crafted instruments of resistance", because they allowed the fugitive slaves the means to expose various practices of oppression. Therefore, learning to read proved a vital asset in the ex-slave's resistance struggle against white domination, as was the case with Douglass. As it was mentioned in the introduction to the thesis, at the age of eight, in 1826, Douglass was sent to Baltimore to serve in the family of Mr. and Mrs. Hugh Auld. The experience at the household of Mr. and Mrs. Auld turned out to be a turning point in Douglass' life as a slave, for there he became regularly exposed to hearing Mrs. Auld read the Bible, and in Douglass' words, it "awakened my curiosity in respect to this mystery of reading, and roused in me the desire to learn (2003, 49). Douglass learned, indeed, in a relatively short time, "to master the alphabet" and to "spell words of three or four letters" (ibid.).

At first, learning to read and write served Douglass the function of satisfying his natural curiosity to learn and to acquire new skills. Soon, however, Douglass became to understand the value of reading and writing for a slave, and it turned out to be his master, Mr. Auld, who

was responsible for providing Douglass with his first arguments against slavery in his future struggle as an antislavery spokesman. After discovering that his wife, Mrs. Auld, had taught Douglass how to read, Mr. Auld instantly forbade her to continue with the matter, on the grounds that “[l]earning will spoil the best nigger in the world. If he learns how to read the Bible it will forever unfit him to be a slave. He should know nothing but the will of his master, and learn to obey it. . . . If you teach him how to read, he’ll want to know how to write, and this accomplished, he’ll be running away with himself” (ibid.) From this revelation, Douglass quickly understood the anxiety of Mr. Auld, and his speech became a great advantage to Douglass’ intellectual development: “This was a new and special revelation, dispelling a painful mystery against which my youthful understanding had struggled . . . to wit, the white man’s power to perpetuate the enslavement of the black man” (2003, 50). Thus far, Douglass had been told that the division of men into masters and slaves was based on the will of God, and that this was the natural state of affairs, which neither masters nor slaves could have an effect on. Mr. Auld’s revelation, however, proved it otherwise. Douglass discovered that the division into masters and slaves was, in fact, based on the white man’s power and effort to keep the slaves ignorant and to prevent them from gaining access to knowledge. Ignorance, thus, prevented the slave from providing arguments against his enslavement and to challenge the white man’s ideology of racial supremacy.

The events described above mark the initial steps in Douglass’ individual resistance to slavery, and, since acquiring the skills to read and write, Douglass became increasingly target-oriented and independent in his thinking and in his actions. The ability to read quickly provided Douglass concrete value in his search for the “pathway from slavery to freedom” (Douglass 2003, 50). In his desire to learn to read, Douglass managed to get his hands on a popular school book, *The Columbian Orator*, where he found a dialogue between a master and a slave engaged in an argument for and against slavery. The dialogue proved a great

advantage for Douglass, and besides the mentioned master-slave discussion, *The Columbian Orator* provided Douglass with other influential writings on the subject of slavery: “The reading of these speeches added much to my limited stock of language, and enabled me to give tongue to many interesting thoughts which had often flashed through my mind and died away for want of words in which to give them utterance. . . From the speeches of Sheridan I got a bold and powerful denunciation of oppression and a most brilliant vindication of the rights of man” (Douglass 2003, 54). These remarks illustrate how Douglass discovered, with the help of the newly acquired skill of reading, his own potential in the struggle against slavery and towards freedom. His aim, from then on, was from ignorance to knowledge and from bondage to liberty. Douglass’ determination in the matter comes out as an increased directness and even aggressive resistance:

I have met, at the South, many good, religious colored people who were under the delusion that God required them to submit to slavery and to wear their chains with meekness and humility. I could entertain no such nonsense as this, and I quite lost my patience when I found a colored man weak enough to believe such stuff. Nevertheless, eager as I was to partake of the tree of knowledge, its fruits were bitter as well as sweet. ‘Slaveholders’, thought I, ‘are only a band of successful robbers, who, leaving their own homes, went into Africa for the purpose of stealing and reducing my people to slavery. (ibid.)

The change in Douglass’ resistance to slavery, from a silent sufferer into a vocal opponent, is now visible. Before acquiring the ability to read, Douglass focused, in his narration, on giving voice to the inhuman treatment and suffering of slaves. After gaining in knowledge, his resistance is outspoken, bold and reproachful in nature. In addition, the quotation provided above, shows that, as a result of gaining in knowledge, Douglass situated himself apart from the ignorant slaves who have not learned what he now knows. Another example of the pronunciation of Douglass’ increased independence and directness is the following proclamation which Douglass utters as a justification for the act of stealing food from the neighboring houses:

I am not only the slave of Master Thomas, but I am the slave of society at large. Society at large has bound itself, in form and in fact, to assist Master Thomas in robbing me of my rightful liberty, and of the just reward of my labor; therefore, whatever rights I have against Master Thomas I have equally against those confederated with him in robbing me of liberty. As society has marked me out as privileged plunder, on the principle of self-preservation, I am justified in plundering in turn. Since each slave belongs to all, all must therefore belong to each. (Douglass 2003, 68)

The passage illustrates Douglass' personal sense of justice, and his understanding of the value of himself as an individual. It also shows his awareness of how the slave system functions and what his role is in it. Douglass is acting openly rebellious against his enslavement and oppression, which is the outcome of his newly gained understanding of the injustice of the enslavement of the blacks.

Soon after Douglass' intellectual awakening about his personal value as an individual, a change in what he considers as worthy of narrating can be detected, based on where his interests from then on lay. For example, at the beginning of his service in the household of Mr. and Mrs. Auld in Baltimore, a large part of Douglass' narration, related to the time spent there, was dedicated to describing the characteristics and personalities of the members of the Auld family, and, in particular, what their attitude towards Douglass was like. This was, thus, the situation before Douglass learned how to read and before he started to think about himself as unjustly enslaved. Later on, however, during the process of his intellectual awakening and his growing in knowledge, his focus turned away from the Auld family, towards other commitments and attachments, which involved, for example, teaching other young blacks in his neighborhood how to read, and the company of some white boys from whom Douglass, in turn, received instruction. These are, thus, examples of how Douglass' social position in his present community in Baltimore changed, and, therefore, the focus in the narrative shifts from the earlier victim position to a situation where Douglass becomes an active agent of resistance.



In the beginning, Douglass' rebellion against his enslavement was realized in his intellectual awakening, of which the first signs were his private thoughts about the white man's unjust power to enslave the blacks. Soon, however, Douglass' understanding about the white man's effort to keep slaves in ignorance and about the God given division of men into masters and slaves according to skin color, became, eventually, announced also in public. In 1836, Douglass had yet another master, Mr. Freeland, at whose ownership Douglass worked regularly as a field hand. At the plantation of Mr. Freeland, Douglass had developed close connections to his fellow slaves, and in the company of these slaves, for the first time, Douglass publicly verbalized his thoughts and made his first public speech of resistance:

It was in vain that we had been taught . . . the duty of obedience to our masters – to recognize God as the author of our enslavement – to regard running away as an offense, alike against God and man – to esteem our enslavement a merciful and beneficial arrangement – to esteem our condition in this country a paradise to that from which we had been snatched in Africa – to consider our hard hands and dark color as God's displeasure, and as pointing us out as the proper subjects of slavery. . . I had become altogether too big for my chains. (2003, 107)

Here, Douglass addresses directly his fellow slaves about the injustice of their enslavement. Douglass wants to make them understand what he has come to understand by learning to read, that it is possible to question and to resist the dominant discourse which renders the white race superior to the blacks. The passage is meaningful also because Douglass both recognizes the white ideology and denies its accuracy. In addition, he invites his fellow slaves to do likewise. As it was mentioned earlier, along Douglass' intellectual awakening, resulting from his acquired skill to read and write, he became increasingly bolder and outspoken in his resistance. As his boldness in the matter grew, likewise did his self-esteem, of which the last sentence in the quote provides evidence. In fact, although the passage above was directed to his fellow slaves, Douglass' individual resistance seems to be directed, in particular, towards the enslavement of Douglass himself.

In his narrative, Douglass provides several instances of open rebellion against slave law and slave conventions, for he reveals having committed such offences as stealing food, teaching other slaves to read and defending himself against his master, Mr. Covey. Likewise, after the conflict between Douglass and Mr. Covey, Douglass reports having become “reckless” in his behavior as a slave, and also that he was considered “hard to whip” and “guilty of kicking back” (2003, 98). These instances serve the purpose of challenging the entire slave system of 19<sup>th</sup>-century America. Gibson, for instance, even argues that “Douglass strikes at the heart of slave society, at its very center which . . . requires white-male dominance. The system requires not only that slaves be obedient to their masters but that women and all others related to a particular household should exist in subservient relation to the patriarch's authority. To challenge that center is to challenge the whole structure of antebellum Southern society” (Gibson 1992, 591). What Gibson here suggests is, actually, equivalent to the definition of postcolonial counter-discourse, which was discussed in the theory section of this thesis, and which is the primary focus of the whole text. The center applies to white society and white ideology, which then situates the blacks on the periphery. As a continuation, the dominant discourse is the one supported by the center, i.e. the white slaveholding community, and anything in opposition to that discourse, and anything that rejects and challenges that discourse can be interpreted as counter-discourse. Therefore, Douglass’ resistance to slave law is counter-discourse to the dominant discourse.

Individual resistance, in Douglass’ case, can also be seen as Douglass’ personal struggle to shake off his slave identity and to adopt a new identity as a self-made man and a self-reliant hero. Douglass was relatively eager to emphasize the aspects of his character which made him stand out among the rest of the slaves as somehow intellectually superior or advanced. For example, when Douglass, along with a few close slave friends, finally starts to make concrete plans for their escape from slavery, Douglass feels the need to emphasize his personal

importance in the matter: “I had . . . the advantage of them all in experience, and in a knowledge of letters. This gave me a great influence over them. Perhaps not one of them, left to himself, would have dreamed of escape as a possible thing. . . If any one is to blame for disturbing the quiet of the slaves and slavemasters of the neighborhood of St. Michaels, *I am the man*. I claim to be the instigator of the high crime” (Douglass 2003, 109; emphasis in original). Douglass, thus, takes pride in acting as a rebellious provocateur and wishes to take credit for it, as well.

In a way, it could be argued that Douglass’ resistance to white hegemony and white domination functions in two opposite directions. On one hand, Douglass’ aim is to challenge the legitimacy of the white man’s right to oppress and enslave the blacks. Douglass sought to achieve this goal, firstly by behaving disobedient and reckless towards his masters and violating slave legislature, and, secondly, by spreading the idea, through his narrative, that compromising the slave system is possible. On the other hand, in order to spread the idea of resistance and to reach the white audience, Douglass had to acquire the tools necessary for that, reading and writing. Those skills Douglass learned by the guidance of his white masters, and since then, each piece of information that Douglass gained from newspapers and articles, was related to white ideology and white culture. Therefore, Douglass’ process of intellectual awakening meant the acquisition of the dominant way of thinking. White influence on Douglass’ thought is a matter which has been studied extensively. For instance, Drake (1997, 91) argues that there is a common pattern in slave narratives which can be detected, and according to which the ex-slave attempts to create a new identity for him- or herself which would fit the dominant culture’s norms. The same applies to Douglass as well. While trying to find a way from slavery to freedom and from oppression to independence, Douglass rose from ignorance to knowledge, but, at the same time, acquired himself a new identity which resembled more white American than African American. Drake (ibid.) argues that what many

of the African American slave narrators assumed was, specifically, an American identity. Many critics, such as Blight (1990, 301), however, in relation to Douglass, write about the African American dilemma of being both American and black, which is in concordance with what was stated above about Douglass' challenge of opposing the culture of white domination and, at the same time, adopting the conventions of that culture in order to spread his ideas. All in all, the influence of strong white figures in Douglass' life, figures such as the white masters and, later in his life, the white abolitionists, especially William L. Garrison, from whom Douglass acquired a large part of his antislavery propaganda, cannot be overlooked in consideration of Douglass' identity formation.

In short, learning to read proved a turning point for Douglass, in his resistance to the oppression of black slaves and to white domination. Literacy provided him the means to gain access to information regarding the institution of slavery and its power structures, and the skill of reading increased his vocabulary, which allowed him to address his thoughts in words of resistance. During these early years of intellectual awakening, Douglass' resistance to slavery and to white ideology was mainly individual, although early signs of wanting to spread counter-discursive thinking became visible at times. Later on, however, after his escape from slavery and along his participation in the antislavery circles, his resistance becomes increasingly political and widespread, which is the topic of the following subchapter.

#### **4.2. Political Resistance**

The final subchapter of this thesis focuses on Douglass' resistance struggle during the antebellum and post- Civil War era in the United States. During this period, Douglass' resistance became increasingly political and widespread which is to be seen in his active participation in the white abolitionist circuits soon after his escape to freedom in 1838.

Another feature, which arises in Douglass' thinking after the abolition of slavery, is his promotion of the intellectual and social elevation of the American blacks. These are, thus, the issues which will be discussed in the subchapter at hand.

Frederick Douglass managed to escape from slavery in Baltimore to New Bedford, Massachusetts in September 1838. For the first few years Douglass learned how to live as a free man and to lead an independent life. In 1840, some 20 years before the Civil War and the abolition of slavery in the United States, Douglass was introduced to the abolitionist circuit of Massachusetts where he was asked to address the audience in an antislavery convention, the leader of which William L. Garrison was. From here on began Douglass' public career as an antislavery lecturer which, over time, developed more in the direction of a race leader. His first two autobiographies, *The Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, an American Slave*, and *My Bondage and my Freedom*, were published in 1845 and 1855, at the time of vast political tensions between the slaveholders of the South and those in opposition of slavery in the North. Douglass' early autobiographies, thus, fit in the political atmosphere of the time and concentrate mostly on spreading antislavery propaganda. The third autobiography, *The Life and Times of Frederick Douglass, Written by Himself*, first published in 1881, almost 20 years after the abolition of slavery, however, also contains the thoughts of a race leader and a civil rights activist. Therefore, the last subchapter of this thesis concentrates on some of the differences in Douglass' thoughts and writings before and after emancipation, and continues on uncovering what kind of counter-discourse Douglass provided against racial discrimination which, like the slave system, was based on white domination and black oppression.

During his early years as a political figure in the American antislavery movement, Douglass was greatly influenced by white abolitionist figures, the Garrisonians, whose leader William Lloyd Garrison was. As Douglass notes, the Garrisonians found an important

advocate of antislavery sentiment in Douglass, whose recollections of his sufferings in slavery proved valuable for the cause of abolition. Douglass soon found this arrangement insufficient for his growing needs in the struggle for the abolition of slavery and against black oppression. As Douglass notes (2003, 153), he was merely urged to narrate his experiences in slavery, and was told to let the white abolitionists take care of the antislavery politics. Douglass, however, was willing to do the opposite. As the Garrisonians promoted moral suasion as the best means to abolish slavery (Martin 1984, 195), Douglass became increasingly eager to favor political action on behalf of the free blacks in the country. Thus, Douglass' race politics supported radical abolition and the engagement of blacks themselves in the struggle for emancipation. Of Douglass' personal vision as to the means of abolishing slavery, an example is given in Douglass' reaction to the radical abolitionist John Brown's plans to organize an armed slave revolt at Harpers Ferry, Virginia in 1859, in order to abolish slavery at once. Brown "did not believe that moral suasion would ever liberate the slave, or that political action would abolish the system" and that "[n]o people . . . could have self-respect, or be respected, who would not fight for their freedom" (Douglass 2003, 195). Although Douglass did not join Harpers Ferry Raid, John Brown's ideology had an impact on Douglass' thought as well, for, not long after the conversation with Mr. Brown, Douglass (2003, 197) expressed similar thoughts at an antislavery convention in Ohio, by announcing that "slavery could only be destroyed by bloodshed".

As implied above, in his political thinking, Douglass supported the idea, initiated by radical black abolitionists, of allowing the blacks the opportunity to take matters into their own hands and to become active members of American society. Douglass resented the fact that the national debate over slavery and over the fate of the American slaves was considered the white man's issue. When the Civil War broke out in 1861, Douglass welcomed the war as the one which would end slavery, but he criticized, as did many radical abolitionists, the

Union Army of the North for not allowing the free blacks to join the armed forces: “I reproached the North that they fought the rebels with only one hand, when they might strike effectually with two – that they fought with their soft white hand, while they kept their black iron hand chained and helpless behind them – that they fought the effect, while they protected the cause, and that the Union cause would never prosper till the war assumed an antislavery attitude, and the Negro was enlisted on the loyal side” (2003, 242). Once the blacks were eventually allowed to join the Union Army, Douglass, in turn, makes vigorous pleas for the black people of the North to grasp arms and to “smite with death the power that would bury the government and your liberty in the same hopeless grave” (Douglass 2003, 245). Thus, on one hand, Douglass tries to convince his white readers that, if given a chance, blacks would prove valuable and enterprising members of American society. On the other hand, Douglass is reaching for the free blacks of the North to take part in the conflict at hand and prove that they themselves are the primary cause of the war.

Douglass’ remarks on the active engagement of the American blacks, whether in the battles of the Civil War or in active participation of societal life, are in concordance with his ideal of the self-made man. In his narrative, Douglass is eager to emphasize those aspects in his own character and actions which allow him to be regarded as a self-sufficient man, who accomplished literacy almost on his own, who gained his own freedom and who became a respected political person and a social reformer. Douglass’ critics, likewise, often refer to him as self-taught, self-sufficient, and the personification of the American ideal of the self-made man. Martin (1984, 253), for example, characterizes Douglass in the following way: “First, he, like the American nation itself and its most enduring folk heroes, rose above seemingly overwhelming odds to achieve historical distinction. Second, he represents a model self-made man: an exemplary black version of uncommon achievement primarily through the agency of a resolute will and hard toil aided by moral law and divine providence”. If Douglass is to be

seen as a model self-made man, self-reliance was his vision and goal also for the American blacks. While the political and racial atmosphere of the antebellum America was far from granting the blacks the opportunity of racial elevation, Douglass was active in his pursuit of countering white ideology, which held the blacks, slaves and free, as incapable of self-sufficiency and economic success: “I assert . . . that poverty, ignorance, and degradation are the combined evils, or in other words, these constitute the social disease of the freed colored people of the United States. To deliver them from this triple malady is to improve and elevate them, by which I mean simply to put them on an equal footing with their white fellow-countrymen in the sacred right to ‘Life, Liberty, and the pursuit of happiness’” (Douglass 2003, 204). As we can see, Douglass’ political resistance to white domination, to white power and to black inferiority, before and during the American Civil War, was marked by eager promotion of the potential of the American blacks to rise to intellectual, economic and societal success if given the opportunity.

After the American Civil War, and after the black population of the United States of America was eventually freed by the emancipation proclamation in 1863 and during the consecutive years, Douglass found himself in a situation where his cause of resistance could no longer be directed towards the abolition of slavery. Therefore, a shift in Douglass’ political agenda can be detected, for his thoughts and efforts were, from then on, basically until his death in 1895, dedicated to the promotion of the civil rights of the American blacks and against the continued oppression of his race. The abolition of slavery granted the blacks their freedom, but it did not make them citizens of the United States. Therefore, Douglass’ agenda after the emancipation became increasingly racial and political. It can be argued that, even after the abolition of slavery, Douglass continued to provide counter-discursive arguments in his appeals against the inferior status of the blacks in the white dominated society: “Though slavery was abolished, the wrongs of my people were not ended. Though they were not



slaves, they were not yet quite free. . . [T]he Negro, after his emancipation, was precisely in his state of destitution. . . He was free from the individual master, but the slave of society. He had neither money, property, nor friends. He was free from the old plantation, but he had nothing but the road under his dusty feet. . . He was, in a word, literally, turned loose, naked, hungry, and destitute, to the open sky” (Douglass 2003, 274). Thus, Douglass’ cause during the later part of his life concentrated on speaking for the civil rights of the American blacks and for the social and intellectual elevation of his race. Likewise, the later part of his narrative is dedicated to the promotion of the civil rights cause and the elevation of the blacks.

Therefore, it could be assumed that the need to republish a third version of his autobiography, *The Life and Times of Frederick Douglass, Written by Himself*, in 1881, was due to a need to continue on speaking for his people.

Vast changes in society, concerning the African American population, took place during the years after the American Civil War. These changes between 1865 and 1895 were followed and commented on in Douglass’ narrative from his point of view as a political race leader and “a major black Republican party stalwart” (Martin 1984, 16). Some critics consider *The Life and Times of Frederick Douglass* considerably less fascinating and stylistically less intriguing than his earlier autobiographies, *The Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass* in particular, and *My Bondage and My Freedom*, which is widely held to be a mere successor to the first (Andrews 1986, 267). Kolchin (1994), for instance, speculates on why the final account of Douglass’ life has attracted critical interests by far the least of the three versions, and concludes that it provides much less information about Douglass himself and his experiences, and “focuses on public affairs and ignores even Douglass’ own family”. Indeed, Douglass’ final autobiography does present a rather egotistic view of him, and as Chander (2002, 105) notes, “Douglass is primarily concerned with building his image for posterity”. Chander (ibid.) even claims that Douglass “presents himself as a Moses for his people, who not only

delivered them from the jaws of slavery but also fought incessantly for their citizenship and equal rights". On the other hand, *The Life and Times of Frederick Douglass* offers a wide perspective on slavery and the socio-historical circumstances of 19<sup>th</sup>-century America, since the narrative covers nearly a decade of political stirring in the country. In addition, from the point of view of Douglass' readers at the end of the 19th century, Douglass' experiences in slavery provide them with a reminder of the original reasons behind political upheaval in the United States after the Civil War and during the early years of the 20th century, when the country was heading towards the Civil Rights Movement of the 1950s.

In short, the chapter discussed how Douglass resisted slavery and the oppression of slaves, and later of the freed blacks, in his narrative. Learning to read played a crucial role in his early resistance, for it allowed him to give voice to the ideas that had occurred to him before, but which he had not been able to pronounce properly. A difference in his resistance can be detected between the early stages of his intellectual awakening and later in his life when he became a public figure and a race leader. In the beginning, his resistance can be interpreted as individual, for he defied his oppression by learning to read and write, by teaching other slaves to read and by defending himself against his violent master. Once a fugitive slave, Douglass' resistance became increasingly political and he started to spread antislavery propaganda together with the white abolitionists. His resistance politics included the radical abolition of slavery and the promotion of the American blacks to become active members of society and take part in their own elevation from ignorance and degradation to intellectual and economic success.

## 5. Conclusion

In this study, I have chosen the final version of Frederick Douglass' three autobiographies, *The Life and Times of Frederick Douglass*, which is the least studied of his works, to illustrate various counter-discursive practices that challenge and resist white hegemony during the time of slavery in the United States. According to the ideology of white supremacy, the American black population was considered intellectually inferior, and it allowed the treatment of slaves as commodities. This ideological thinking, which represented the dominant discourse of its time, was what Douglass wanted to challenge by revealing the truth about slavery; its dehumanizing effect and its corruptive nature on every individual that it touches upon.

Throughout this study I have tried to show that Douglass' narrative can be read from a postcolonial point of view and situated in a postcolonial context, because it describes the situation in which a superior power captures or enslaves a people, forbids their rights, suppresses their culture and forces them under oppression. In addition, the narrative illustrates the struggle against that oppression and for the individual rights of the enslaved people. The concept of counter-discourse plays a crucial role in that struggle, and the stylistic choices that Douglass made in his narrative, function as counter-discourse to the dominant discourse of slavery and oppression. With stylistic choices I mean the manner in which Douglass chose to narrate his experiences in slavery and what he decided to include in his narrative. Douglass chose to include detailed descriptions of his early childhood experiences in slavery, when he, together with other young slaves, suffered from the depravity of food, clothing, and nurture. Similarly, he included careful depictions of violence and intense physical suffering, and claimed the 'evil of slavery' as the instigator of physical and mental corruption. As Douglass pointed out the dehumanizing treatment of slaves, at the same time, he emphasized the

humanity of the slaves, for example, by narrating in detail the fleeting moments of motherly love that Douglass experienced in his early childhood.

As counter-discourse to white hegemonic thinking, according to which blacks were considered intellectually inferior to the whites, Douglass stressed the importance of literacy, which he gained mostly by himself. Acquiring the ability to read are recurring themes in most slave narratives, because it seems to provide a justification to the slave's existence in white dominated society, in which literacy was considered a distinguishing factor between animals and human beings. Literacy also played an important part in Douglass' intellectual awakening, because the skill provided Douglass with the means to give voice to his antislavery thoughts.

Individual and political resistance became to characterize Douglass' life after his escape from slavery. He became a prominent figure in the antislavery movement during the antebellum era, and he was considered a race leader among the American blacks after the emancipation, when he struggled for equal rights for his people. Douglass valorized the fundamentally American ideal of the self-made man, who was enterprising, self-sufficient and self-taught. This was his future vision for the blacks, which would lead to the social and economic elevation of the black race.

Douglass' autobiographies have long since established a permanent standing in the canon of African American literature, and they are also considered an integral part of the history of American literature as a whole. The first version of Douglass' slave narratives, *The Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass* (1845), is the most studied version, and it has gathered critical interests at least because of its influence in the development of the slave narrative tradition and because of its contribution to the documentation of the black experience in America. This study, on the other hand, has hopefully managed to touch upon

the least studied version of Douglass' life story and take into consideration the postcolonial aspect of the black experience.

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