

“A FIELD LATELY PLOUGHED”:
THE EXPRESSIVE LANDSCAPES OF GENDER
AND RACE IN THE ANTEBELLUM SLAVE NARRATIVES OF
FREDERICK DOUGLASS AND WILLIAM GRIMES

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Chapter 1

INTRODUCTION

The U.S. fugitive slave narrative is a genre that, from the time of its conception to its modern reception in literary theory today, sparks a series of ironies, both political and cultural. During its politically-oriented contemporaneous period, when it served as a means for black ex-slaves to expose and condemn the inhumane system of slavery, the slave narrative was by its very existence a cultural taboo: an assertion that blacks, thought by the dominant readership to be intellectually inferior to whites, were incapable not only of comprehending injustice but also fighting against it. By making themselves the subjects of their own life stories, America's first black authors controversially presumed "both the worth of that self and its interest for a reader"—a presumption that directly assaulted the racial codes of the time.¹ Not merely a politicized indictment of slavery, the U.S. slave narrative functioned moreover as the first major literary vehicle for blacks to express themselves in a culture whose oppression of their race extended far beyond the system of slavery and into their cultural identity itself.

One potential limitation, however, to the U.S. slave narrative's value as black autobiography was its politicized requirement to appeal to a largely racist culture, oftentimes through letters of validation from white sponsors and other possible forms of editorial intervention. James Olney, forging a parallel between ex-slave narrators' sponsors and their former masters, writes that white

¹ Valerie Smith, *Self-Discovery and Authority in Afro-American Narrative* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1987), 21.

abolitionists “were too often inclined to confuse sponsorship with authorship and to take possession of ‘their’ ex-slaves in a manner not altogether unlike the original possession by slaveholders.”² John Sekora even goes so far as to claim that the antebellum slave narrative, due to the genre’s reliance on “white interrogation” over “black recollection,” cannot really be termed an autobiographical discourse at all.³ Even if the ex-slave narrator managed to speak his or her whole story without censorship, the white-dominated readership would view the narrative through its own racist perceptions anyway. “For, above all else,” asserts Henry Louis Gates, Jr., “every public spoken and written utterance of the ex-slaves was written and published for an essentially hostile auditor or interlocutor, the white abolitionist or the white slaveholder, both of whom imposed a meaning upon the discourse of the black subject.”⁴ The challenge for ex-slave narrators was thus multifaceted: they had to not only combat imposed discursive restrictions by white editors but also the racist views of the very culture they were attempting to persuade.

When he began penning the *Narrative of Frederick Douglass, an American Slave* in the mid-1840s, Douglass was certainly conscious of such cultural impositions and took care to craft his slave narrative in a manner that aligned with contemporary trends in the genre. As preparation for his entrance into the literary field, Douglass read and drew influences from dozens of slave

² Olney, “The Founding Fathers—Frederick Douglass and Booker T. Washington,” in *Slavery and the Literary Imagination*, eds. Deborah E. McDowell and Arnold Rampersad (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1989), 5.

³ Sekora, “Black Message / White Envelope: Genre, Authenticity, and Authority in the Antebellum Slave Narrative,” *Callaloo* 32 (1987): 509-10.

⁴ Gates, *Figures in Black: Words, Signs, and the “Racial” Self* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1987), 105.

narratives and various abolitionist publications, particularly Theodore Dwight Weld's *American Slavery as It Is* (1839).⁵ Additionally influenced by Benjamin Franklin's autobiographical writings as well as Reverend John Foster's 1805 essay "On a Man's Writing Memoirs of Himself," Douglass combined Franklin's masculine emphasis on self-made manhood with Foster's outline on the need for autobiographical spiritual progression to forge his own self-made journey from slavery to freedom.⁶ Like other slave narratives, Douglass was sure to back his testimony with letters from white abolitionists, with enthusiastic statements by William Lloyd Garrison and Wendell Phillips opening the *Narrative*. Hoping to reach the widest possible audience, Douglass stayed close to tried-and-true methods of persuasion and self-authentication. As he mentioned during a trip to Scotland following his first autobiography's publication, Douglass wrote his *Narrative* less for any purely autobiographical reasons than to simply prove his identity as a fugitive slave so that he could then carry on with his political goals unquestioned.⁷ Because of this, Douglass welcomed the editorial intrusion of white sponsors like Garrison and Phillips; he was a man "whose every word must further the cause of the Abolition movement," and he accepted the discursive restrictions that inevitably came with this noble cause.⁸

Due to its adherence to previous models, along with the singular literary power he invests in them, Douglass's 1845 *Narrative* became what has long

⁵ John W. Blasingame, ed., Introduction to *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, an American Slave* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2001), xv-xvi.

⁶ *Ibid.*, xi-xii, xiv-xv.

⁷ Blasingame, ed., *The Frederick Douglass Papers, Series 1: Speeches, Debates, and Interviews, Vol. 1, 1841-46* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1979), 37-38, 82, 88-89, 132-33.

⁸ Jill Ker Conway, *When Memory Speaks: Reflections on Autobiography* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, Inc., 1998), 7.

been considered the archetypal slave narrative. It is a work, writes Gates, that “exploited the potential and came to determine the shape of language in the slave narrative.”⁹ Indeed, Douglass’s *Narrative* explicitly exhibits the four structural components that Frances Smith Foster, in her study of the genre, calls the “mythological pattern” of slave narratives: first, Douglass’s “innocence lost” is depicted through the cruelty of his masters, most notably the slave driver Edward Covey; second, Douglass gains via literacy his “realization of alternatives” and begins to envision the possibility of escape; third, after a botched attempt to escape with some fellow slaves, Douglass manages to “escape from slavery”; and fourth, Douglass finds his “freedom obtained” as a new man in New York, with the final paragraph—excluding the *Narrative*’s epilogue—already anticipating his rise as a speaker for the abolitionist cause.¹⁰ Through this mythological pattern, the narratological structure of Douglass’s text, like that of many slave narratives, plays like a kind of spiritual odyssey, where the plot moves “from the idyllic life of a Garden of Eden into the wilderness, the struggle for survival, the providential help, and the arrival into the Promised Land.”¹¹ Douglass’s language itself, which often exhibits a hopeful anticipation for “a better day coming,” only serves to compound this Judeo-Christian metaphor of religious salvation; his is a narrative that remains steadfastly conscious of its own structural characteristics and utilizes them at every turn to proclaim the glories of

⁹ Gates, *Figures in Black*, 83.

¹⁰ Frances Smith Foster, *Witnessing Slavery: The Development of Ante-bellum Slave Narratives* (Madison: The University of Wisconsin Press, 1979), 85.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 84.

freedom, even at points where this freedom is still far from his narrative's happy resolution.

Douglass's *Narrative* further illustrates Foster's model in the way its dualistic shift from slavery (hell) to freedom (heaven) is manifested in the antebellum American landscape itself. The spatial-political divide between the nation's free states and slave states physicalizes Douglass's narrative structure into the geography itself, where his redemptive movement from slavery to freedom is paralleled by an actualized physical movement upwards, with the South acting "much like a wilderness of untamed land, ineffective religion, and savage brutality" and the North becoming, in contrast, "the location of enlightened Christianity, harmony, and brotherhood."¹² Motivated by a desire to appeal to Northern readers, Douglass's dualistic separation of North and South was all the more enforced by the general requirement of early slave narratives to create a clear distinction between the "abuses of Southern slavery" and the "rewards of Northern freedom."¹³ The inherent hierarchical binary opposition between the North and South that serves as a structuring motif in slave narratives like Douglass's could thus be conveniently exploited by Northern abolitionists to portray their region as a location of refuge and safety, especially when compared to abusive conditions of slavery in the South.

To say that Douglass's *Narrative* is merely the result of editorial impositions, however, undervalues the way in which Douglass utilizes the cultural

¹² Ibid., 76-77.

¹³ Norma Lozano-Jackson, "The Heroic Voice in Black Slave Narratives and its Reconstruction of the Black Slave Community: Talking About, To, and Through Whiteness" (PhD diss., The State University of New Jersey, 2001), 6.

milieu surrounding his first autobiography to further his own personal goals, with one of his primary U.S.-adopted principles being the ideal of masculine independence. In situating self-made manhood as a key theme in his *Narrative*, not to mention in his speeches and writings thereafter, Douglass was exemplifying a national tradition that, since the maturation of the Northern working class, drew on its revolutionary heritage in order to make “independence a powerful masculine personal ideal.”¹⁴ In the early nineteenth century, this ideal naturally established itself in the autobiographical genre, where the literary establishment was largely dominated by white men who took pride in their recent independence from England. Contextualizing the subject’s independence within the capitalistic pursuit of wealth, the early U.S. autobiography—with some minor exceptions—conflated masculinity with financial stability, where the author’s achievements were signified by his agency and possession of fortune.¹⁵ Because of its masculine focus, early American autobiography on the whole used “a language which denigrates the feminine” and “celebrates the experience of the atomistic Western male hero.”¹⁶ In many respects Douglass’s *Narrative* exhibits these masculine values—not so much from cultural pressure or imposition, necessarily, but from an intentional purpose to champion these values within the black male slave who had long been emasculated by an oppressive, denigrating institution and by a racist culture that intended to keep him there. Following Foster’s mythological pattern almost to the letter, the *Narrative* configures its

¹⁴ David R. Roediger, *The Wages of Whiteness: Race and the Making of the American Working Class* (London: Verso, 1991), 13.

¹⁵ Conway, *When Memory Speaks*, 7.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 3.

dualistic spiritual model of hell-to-heaven in its protagonist's anticipatory journey from feminized object to masculinized subject, with his success in achieving freedom being the ultimate testimony to his self-made manhood.

Douglass's championing of the masculine spirit in his *Narrative*, as particularly depicted in his scuffle with the slave-driver Covey, is subversive in itself, considering how many antebellum slave narrators—facing a culture that automatically feminized black males—tended to censor or apologize for their masculine acts of empowerment. In his study *North Carolina Slave Narratives*, William L. Andrews observes how ex-slaves like Moses Roper, Lunsford Lane, and Moses Grandy all had to carefully neutralize their actions against whites in their narratives so that these authors would not meet disapproval and, as a consequence, lose sales in the primarily white literary market. Roper, for example, assures readers that his acts of trickery while escaping slavery “arose from necessity, not from design,” lest the white public suspects he will act in a similar manner as a freed person¹⁷. Lane also depicts himself, according to Andrews, “as a man with no ax to grind against slavery and as studiously impartial, particularly about the white men who had claimed him as property.”¹⁸ Moreover, although Grandy initially presents himself in his narrative as “self-reliant, tough-minded, and demanding in his dealings with whites,” he eventually “softens and fades into a more ingratiating freeman by the end of the narrative,” which Andrews attributes to Grandy's need for financial contribution from white

¹⁷ Andrews, *North Carolina Slave Narratives: The Lives of Moses Roper, Lunsford Lane, Moses Grandy, & Thomas H. Jones* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2003), 6.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 8.

readers so that he can purchase his still-enslaved family.¹⁹ These acts of self-censorship, if not also self-castration, illustrate the problematic manner in which ex-slave narrators were compelled to essentially apologize, or at the very least offer an explanation, for their masculine acts of resistance, no matter how unjust their enslavement might be. Failure to do so would risk losing support from a white population that, although not made up of slaveholders, was by and large suspicious of blacks who made too many claims about their self-made independence.

Granted, the apologetic tone offered by Roper, Lane, and Grandy is not uncommon in female slave narratives, either. Harriet Jacobs, for example, insists in the preface to *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* that her reasons for writing are not “to attract attention to myself” or “to excite sympathy for my own sufferings,” which owe to her surrounding culture’s stipulation that women, much more black women, remain silent and practice propriety—a social demand that Jacobs must especially contend with when describing her sexual abuse in the hands of her master at a later point in her narrative.²⁰ However, the fact that male slave narrators shared the same gendered constraints as females like Jacobs only validates how black men remained not merely degraded racially but also, in a contemporaneous context, “degraded” through feminization. It is this feminization that Douglass rebels against in his *Narrative*, which he ultimately uses to justify his masculine acts of violence and insurrection against his captors. Although he offers a brief explanation for his critical view of religion in his closing

¹⁹ Ibid., 11.

²⁰ Harriet Jacobs, *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* (Boston, 1861), 6, 82-89.

pages, Douglass remains unapologetic about his masculinity and even makes his anticipation for liberated manhood the driving theme in his first autobiography.

Despite its thematic purpose within the genre, the clear-cut, straightforward model of masculine salvation, as outlined in Foster's mythological pattern and as depicted in Douglass's *Narrative*, does not convey an accurate representation of the lives of black ex-slaves in the antebellum North, many of whom continued to face hardship, grief, and a persistently racist society even after escape. Testimonials like the *Narrative of the Life and Adventures of Henry Bibb, An American Slave* (1849-50) and Harriet Jacobs's *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* (1861), among others, chart their protagonists' journeys to freedom in a complex terrain of escape, recapture, and, in Jacobs's case, an unbearably long period of static concealment—narratives that ultimately fail to follow the unambiguous, heroic path from slavery to freedom implied in Foster's pattern and that complicate the genre's ability to function as a religious metaphor in the traditionally redemptive sense. The religious autobiography at the time, after all, was built upon "a clearly articulated idea of human nature as sinful and weak"; for the religious autobiographer to move forward from this state, he must, with God's guidance, reject his "sinful and weak" nature and rise to a more righteous state.²¹ In the case of the slave narrative, however, the initial period in bondage was not the cause of any original sin or weakness on the part of the slave, but rather of his unjust location in a racist system. Slavery, David Van Leer argues,

is not primarily a problem of psychological purification, of "weaned affections." Slaves need not mend their ways, but must merely free

²¹ Diane Bjorklund, *Interpreting the Self: Two Hundred Years of American Autobiography* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998), 46.

themselves from a repressive social situation. Unlike sin, slavery has no divine sanction; this fall is wholly unfortunate.²²

If sin is not a perfect metaphor to describe the “wholly unfortunate” state of being a slave, then, as Van Leer adds, salvation is not an accurate representation of slaves’ escape to the North.²³ As Bibb writes in his autobiography, because he cannot trust Northern abolitionists, he must travel to Canada in order to gain true freedom.²⁴ Hardly the location of salvation that white abolitionists wished to depict in the slave narrative genre, the antebellum North placed fugitive slaves in what Todd Vogel terms “a complex state,” where they “confronted local laws restricting voting, a Fugitive Slave Law that made every black vulnerable to slave catchers, and a Dred Scott decision that wiped blacks off the American citizenship map.”²⁵ Rather than offering safety and security, the Northern states at best served as only a temporary haven for ex-slaves, who either had to keep moving or risk being whisked back into slavery by laws that continued to define them as nothing more than lost—or, perhaps more accurately, self-stolen—property.

The complicated state wherein ex-slaves found themselves, as depicted in the narratives of Bibb, Jacobs, and others, problematizes the dualistic relationship between North and South that the genre’s structural components work to enforce, forging an odyssey that, although sometimes still spiritual in

²² David Van Leer, “Reading Slavery: The Anxiety of Ethnicity in Douglass’s *Narrative*,” in *Frederick Douglass: New Literary and Historical Essays*, ed. Eric J. Sundquist (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1990), 127.

²³ *Ibid.*

²⁴ Henry Bibb, *Narrative of the Life and Adventures of Henry Bibb, an American Slave, Written by Himself* (New York, 1849), 51, 60-61.

²⁵ Vogel, *ReWriting White: Race, Class, and Cultural Capital in Nineteenth-Century America* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2004), 17.

nature, does not offer the type of resolutions that might easily persuade fellow slaves to abandon their masters and seek a similarly ambiguous identity in the so-called “free” land of the North. For blacks and especially fugitive slaves, such restrictive legal provisions provided an “uncertain status” where, writes William Andrews, “the definition of freedom for black people remained open.”²⁶ In those slave narratives that dare to depict the limits of liberty in the North, this “open” status is particularly reflected in the texts’ discursive terrain itself, which portends a series of candid observations and brutal details that actively work to deconstruct any sort of mythological pattern associated with the slave narrative genre, thereby offering a more expansive view of the experience for most fugitive slaves.

The *Life of William Grimes*, a particularly frank and brutal diary of a man’s trials within and without slavery, is one such slave narrative, depicting a journey that, while more consistent with the general experience of ex-slaves in the antebellum U.S., often works outside the parameters of traditional, straight-forward slave narratives like Douglass’s. “I often was obliged to go off the road,” Grimes admits at one point in his autobiography²⁷, and although his remark refers to the cautious path he must tread as a fugitive slave, it might just as well describe the thematic and structural characteristics of his open-ended autobiography. Reputedly the first fugitive slave narrative, the publication of Grimes’s *Life* in 1825 initiated the beginning of a genre whose path had not yet

²⁶ William L. Andrews, *To Tell a Free Story: The First Century of Afro-American Autobiography, 1760-1865* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1986), xi.

²⁷ Grimes, *Life of William Grimes, the Runaway Slave*, eds. William L. Andrews and Regina E. Mason (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), 85.

been forged, which likely contributed to its fluid nature. At the time of his narrative's publication, Grimes's self-expressed testimony of injustice under slavery was about five years ahead of its time; it wouldn't be until the 1830s that the U.S. antislavery movement would begin to consciously seek out ex-slaves to testify to their experience in bondage. Once this literary door was open, however, antislavery sentiment became for many early African American authors "a ready forum" for self-expression.²⁸ Whereas in twenty years' time Douglass would take full advantage of this opportunity by drawing inspiration from a number of already established narratives, Grimes as an author found himself singularly "off the road" and essentially alone in new literary territory, uncannily reflecting his sense of alienation and helplessness in the North after escaping from slavery aboard a cargo ship in 1815.

One of the most striking aspects about Grimes's *Life* is that it was published independently, without editorial intervention or validation. Unlike his more famous and lauded successors—including not only Douglass but also Henry Bibb, William Wells Brown, Harriet Jacobs, Moses Roper, and Sojourner Truth—Grimes wrote his narrative with no white sponsor to "authenticate" him in the public eye.²⁹ "For better and for worse," writes William Andrews, "Grimes entered African American literature untutored, unsponsored, and unedited, determined to speak his mind about all he had been through."³⁰ Free from the polemical restrictions of the abolitionist movement, which wouldn't be ready to even consider sponsoring his testimony until at least another five years, Grimes's

²⁸ Andrews, *North Carolina Slave Narratives*, 1.

²⁹ Andrews, ed., Introduction to *Life of William Grimes*, 11.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, 4.

candid, brutally honest opinions—on everything from the techniques of romantic courtship to his Northern poverty following escape—are part of what makes his narrative unique in the slave narrative canon.

Considering how much of his autobiography documents his time after slavery, it's questionable whether Grimes's *Life* truly belongs in the slave narrative genre at all, at least in the traditional sense. Indeed, for a large portion of his narrative, Grimes seems more inclined to discuss the problems of class hardship in the antebellum North than the brutalities of slavery, being particularly keen on blacks' enduring association with poverty—an aspect of his *Life* that would ensure its never being selected for publication by white abolitionists. Despite the reality of class conflict in the so-called “free” states, the very mention of this reality threatened a Northern free labor ideology that aimed to lessen the tension between proprietors and wage workers by emphasizing their shared liberty in contrast to Southern slave labor.³¹ In an effort to protect the romanticized idea of the capitalistic free laborer in a country where by 1860 only five percent of the population held over half of the nation's wealth, Republican and Free-Soil rhetoric served “not only to attack slavery but as a means of defining and idealizing by antithesis, if not with the utmost historical accuracy, Northern labor and society.”³² Utilizing the hierarchical binary inherent in the North/South geography much in the manner that this same geography was

³¹ Amy Schrager Lang, *The Syntax of Class: Writing Inequality in Nineteenth-Century America* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2003), 2; Timothy Patrick McCarthy, “To Plead Our Own Cause: Black Print Culture and the Origins of American Abolitionism,” in *Prophets of Protest: Reconsidering the History of American Abolitionism*, eds. McCarthy and John Stauffer (New York: The New Press, 2006), 127.

³² Michael Newbury, *Figuring Authorship in Antebellum America* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1997), 87-88; Lang, *The Syntax of Class*, 2.

invested in the slave narrative genre, free labor ideology maintained a prescriptive deception in order to deflect the experience of most of its population, especially Northern blacks who not only had to deal with poverty but also a racist culture that endeavored to keep them in poverty.

Conscious of the taboo of mentioning class issues and poverty, Grimes's literary successors tended to only imply the synonymous relationship between being white and being rich. After sharing an alternate version of the Eden myth used by whites to keep blacks in their subservient position, Henry Box Brown, for example, concludes that "ever since [that time] the colored race have had to labor with the shovel and the hoe, while the rich man works with pen and ink!"³³ In contrasting "the colored race" with the "rich man," Brown subtly highlights the U.S. cultural code that mandated African Americans' low position on the economic scale, not to mention their separation from the nation's literary culture.³⁴ No antebellum slave narrator, however, discussed this problematic association more explicitly and fervently than Grimes. His narrative serves, according to Andrews, as a "canny diagnosis of the North as a place where class, even more than color, determines a person's fate."³⁵ Although it is true that, by the end of his narrative, Grimes is more apt to condemn the treatment of the poor over that of blacks, his own poverty is always implicitly connected with the cultural prejudice that first placed him in slavery and then denied him the fruits of freedom. By making this connection, Grimes risks moving beyond the question of slavery and into more taboo terrain, particularly the way that U.S.

³³ Brown, *Narrative of the Life of Henry Box Brown* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), 68.

³⁴ Vogel, *ReWriting White*, 15-16.

³⁵ Andrews, ed., Introduction to *Life of William Grimes*, 25.

laws and capitalism worked together to keep free blacks in a perpetual state of poverty.

Although the self-publication of his narrative provides Grimes with the freedom to write about controversial issues like Northern class conflict, the absence of any editorial assistance contributes to a certain structural looseness and what one might call a lack of literary finesse, at least according to the norms of most published writing at the time. Compared to Douglass's *Narrative* and that autobiography's adherence to an already popularized masculine and spiritually guided framework, Grimes's *Life*, like his own life, is episodic, random, and seemingly without a purposeful metaphorical structure. Indeed, the first fugitive slave narrative seems less a model for the autobiographies of Douglass, Brown, and other ex-slaves than an anticipation of what Peter Brooks describes as the late-nineteenth-century novel's "anxiety at the loss of providential plots," where "the plotting of the individual or social or institutional life story takes on a new urgency when one no longer can look to a sacred masterplot that organizes and explains the world."³⁶ Whether Grimes was conscious of it or not, his narrative's absence of a structuring "sacred masterplot" aligns with the absence of providential salvation in Grimes's experience as a free black in the North. Escaping from slavery only to find persecution and poverty, Grimes's life was one of constant anxiety, with seemingly no divine providence to guide his peripatetic, fragmented path.

³⁶ Peter Brooks, *Reading for the Plot: Design and Intention in Narrative* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, Inc., 1984), 6.

Ingrained with the same unpredictability and momentariness of his life, the structure of Grimes's *Life* essentially serves as an integral part of the text's discourse, where form and content merge into an instructive expression of the antebellum African American experience, both in slavery and in "freedom." His autobiography reveals that, for the ex-slave living in the U.S., the enduring effects of the black experience are oftentimes, if not always, incompatible with the straightforward, hell-to-heaven structure of the archetypal slave narrative, much less the nineteenth-century autobiographical tradition of self-made masculinity. As long as America associated the color of ex-slaves with their past oppression, they would remain oppressed, existing worlds away from the empowering metaphors that structured the white-bred autobiographies of a few choice representatives. The structureless environment of Grimes's narrative thus demonstrates how African American autobiography ultimately remains incompatible within the confines of the dominant society's discourse. His autobiography, as Andrews puts it,

signifies the possibility that the black self could not be recovered in the slave narrative without revealing a complex of disturbing psychological affects that the social system, including the antislavery movement, would have preferred to be neutralized or negated in and by autobiography. In a more profound sense, Grimes's text signifies the possibility that the black self—as a unitive, knowable essence, as the locus of a usable past for its creators and sponsors—could not be recovered at all in the slave narrative. For if, as one theorist of autobiography has argued, we must ultimately choose in autobiography between a strictly historical truth, unmediated by art, and a deeper truth, revealed through literary design, then we must reject Grimes's narrative on both grounds. It fails to give us either truth or design with consistency; it frustrates facile choices between history and art.³⁷

³⁷ Andrews, *To Tell a Free Story*, 80-81.

Not only does Grimes's *Life* frustrate choices between "history and art" but also choices between other binary oppositions in the dominant white culture. In contrast to Grimes's body and identity, his autobiography's complex nature effectively shields it from being used or exploited by any man, especially white abolitionists. Grimes's *Life* seems to exist for no other person than the author himself, exorcising his personal—and highly ambiguous—demons on every page.

What makes Grimes's *Life* so deconstructive is the manner in which it complicates nineteenth-century America's accepted cultural binaries of gender, morality, and race, which were then utilized to uphold white patriarchy and even to justify slavery. During the antebellum period, slavery apologists often rationalized the institution's necessity by emphasizing an unalterable binary between the white and black races. For defenders of the institution, dividing the racial makeup of America into two distinct categories allowed for a smoother application of the hierarchical argument that whites were naturally "superior" to blacks. John C. Calhoun, one of the most outspoken advocates for slavery of his time, made particular use of this hierarchical binary to claim that slavery, as it existed in the South, was not only crucial for economic stability but actually beneficial for blacks as well as whites due to the inherent oppositional differences between the two races. In a speech held on January 10, 1838, Calhoun asserted that Providence itself had

brought together two races, from different portions of the globe, and placed them together in nearly equal numbers in the Southern portion of this Union. They were there inseparably united, beyond

the possibility of separation. Experience had shown that the existing relation between them secured the peace and happiness of both. Each had improved; the inferior greatly; so much so, that it had attained a degree of civilization never before attained by the black race in any age or country. Under no other relation could they co-exist together.³⁸

Calhoun's argument illustrates how proslavery rhetoric relied on an emphasis of "two races," allowing their valuative differences, particularly in the case of the "inferior" black race, to be more naturalized. For a public that relied on strict dichotomies to structure other aspects of their lives—such as the binary oppositions of "pure and impure, Christ and Satan, the spiritual and the carnal, [and] good and evil" in Christianity³⁹—the divine opposition between black and white became a natural association. For religious apologists of slavery in particular, Calhoun's reference to the divine providence of the institution confirms that the white skin is a "distinguishing badge of mind and intellect" and, more significantly, that the opposing black skin is "the sign that a given people had been providentially designed to serve as menial laborers."⁴⁰ In this sense the dualism of religion worked hand in hand with the binary of whiteness and blackness to forge a cultural superstructure, securely partitioned and sanctioned by God Himself.

Although the racial code did not go as far as to sanction slavery there, the Northern states nevertheless assumed a similarly racist opposition between whites and blacks that confined the latter race in a naturalized, immovable

³⁸ Calhoun, *Speeches of John C. Calhoun, Delivered in the House of Representatives and in the Senate of the United States*, in vol. 3 of *The Works of John C. Calhoun*, ed. Richard K. Crallé (New York: D. Appleton and Company, 1854), 179.

³⁹ James H. Evans, *Spiritual Empowerment in Afro-American Literature* (Lewiston: Edwin Mellen Press, 1987), 33.

⁴⁰ David Brion Davis, *Inhuman Bondage: The Rise and Fall of Slavery in the New World* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2006), 189.

position of inferiority. Those who managed to escape from slavery found themselves antagonistically against a more powerful white culture that, even if it didn't desire to send them back to slavery, typically sought to emigrate them elsewhere. This is particularly exemplified in the efforts of the American Colonization Society (ACS), an organization that worked to “purge” America of slavery by sending away those individuals whose racial color was a symbolic reminder of the nation's national sin. Formed in 1816 and supported by most U.S. political leaders, including some white abolitionists, the ACS reasoned that the racial difference between whites and blacks, and its resulting racial prejudice, were too strong in the U.S. for the two races ever to live together in harmony.⁴¹ Abraham Lincoln, a supporter of the ACS, backed up these binary-charged sentiments when he admitted himself that blacks and whites possess an inherent “physical difference” that would “probably forever forbid their living together upon the footing of perfect equality.”⁴² Despite the benevolent intentions of some members in the movement, the ACS and its supporters—Lincoln included—nonetheless perpetuated the notion that whites and blacks existed in a permanent, or naturalized, opposition to one another due to their racial makeup. Fueled by this supposedly irreconcilable opposition between the races, the ACS and other colonial interests reinforced, at least in a symbolic sense, the impossibility of a truly liberated identity for blacks escaping to the North. Metaphorically, the efforts of the ACS relocated the black subject—supposedly

⁴¹ Davis, *Inhuman Bondage*, 256.

⁴² Lincoln, “October 13, 1858.—Sixth Joint Debate, at Quincy, Illinois,” in vol. 1 of *Abraham Lincoln: Complete Works, Comprising His Speeches, Letters, State Papers, and Miscellaneous Writings*, eds. John G. Nicolay and John Hay (New York: The Century Co., 1894), 458.

reaching salvation from his hellish origins through his escape to the North—into the framework of a larger religious narrative, wherein blacks symbolically represent the “sinful” element of a white nation seeking its own salvation through racial homogeneity.

My thesis is an exploration of the manner in which Douglass’s *Narrative* and Grimes’s *Life* utilize, subvert, and sometimes deconstruct the surrounding cultural binaries within their respective slave narratives in order to grapple with their assumed inferiority. In their slave narratives Douglass and Grimes both challenge this accepted naturalization of blacks’ cultural inferiority, but in different ways. In Douglass’s case, the hierarchical binary opposition between whites and blacks is subversively reversed within Douglass’s own accepted binary between male and female, signifying the empowering, heroic presence of the black male in order to feminize his white oppressors. Grimes, on the other hand deconstructs the U.S. culture’s reliance on binary oppositions between not only race but also gender and class. Just as Douglass’s straight-forward narrative accurately reflects his comparatively successful journey to freedom, so does the disjointed, “structureless” environment of Grimes’s narrative reflect its author’s own entangled identity. Neither wholly black or white, masculine or feminine, and enslaved or free, Grimes finds himself by the end of his narrative in a state of liminality, existing apart from the cultural binaries that surround and try to define him. Grimes’s *Life*, like his liminal identity, also exists outside these binaries, working actively—if not always consciously—to deconstruct the surrounding

milieu. In this way Grimes's *Life* clarifies the complex absences of Douglass's *Narrative*, if not also the mythological slave narrative genre as a whole.

In chapter two, I examine how Douglass's *Narrative* exhibits the dualistic progression from hellish slavery to heavenly freedom—i.e., the traditional structuring framework for the slave narrative genre—as a thematic apparatus to express a more personal goal of self-made manhood. Transforming from feminized object to masculinized subject, Douglass subversively uses one accepted binary (gender) against another (race), depicting this binary reversal through a method of anticipation that manifests itself not merely within his autobiography's thematic content but also within its narratological structure. Expanding beyond the pages of his first narrative and into his life itself, Douglass's use of anticipation provides a keen understanding to his self-making philosophy as a liberated individual as well as a spokesperson for the abolitionist cause.

In chapter three, I introduce Grimes's 1825 autobiography as a slave narrative that, unlike the prototypical model offered in Douglass's *Narrative*, fails to offer a spiritual theme of masculine, self-made "redemption" from slavery. Moreover, Grimes's *Narrative* exhibits a formless and scattered aesthetic, which problematizes the use of any traditional dualistic metaphor in its structural framework. The best Grimes offers as an appropriate guiding metaphor for his narrative and ultimately his own life, I argue, is that of a wound: a permanently engraved symbol of the past that restrains future hope and that, in its physicalized actuality on the slave's body, actually does away with both the need

and the possibility of utilizing a structuring metaphor to express the slave's experience.

Finally, in the fourth chapter I explore the various ways in which the "wounded" aesthetic of Grimes's narrative serves as its exceptionally deconstructive strength, paralleling the manner in which Grimes employs his ambiguous identity—both as a mulatto and a perceived commodity in the eyes of whites—to gain implicit control of the dominant culture that seeks to define and castrate him. Although possessing no discernible metaphorical structure, his narrative takes advantage of its sans-metaphorical characteristics to introduce problematic ironies that would be mostly absent in subsequent slave narratives, such as the difficulties of the class system in the Northern states and the failure of masculinity for men who remain forever defined by their initial status as feminized commodities. However, by ridding itself of the cultural binary oppositions ingrained in nineteenth-century American autobiography, Grimes's *Life* opens itself up to an expressive, inclusive environment that promotes a model of non-gendered communal assistance as an alternative to self-made manhood, serving as a memorial for those who are otherwise typically forgotten in subsequent narratives.

Chapter 2
MASCULINITY, HOPE, AND SELF-MAKING
IN DOUGLASS'S *NARRATIVE*

“No nineteenth-century Afro-American thinker,” writes Richard Yarborough, “was more concerned with the issue of manhood than Frederick Douglass.”⁴³ Although masculine independence is closely associated with early American autobiographical tradition, the incorporation of this cultural value within Frederick Douglass’s 1845 *Narrative* also remains conveniently linked to Douglass’s personal ideology. Fifteen years after the publication of his *Narrative*, Douglass explicitly addressed his preoccupation with masculinity in one of his best known speeches, “The Trials and Triumphs of Self-Made Men.” Essentially an ode to its title subject, Douglass’s speech explicates the manner in which men, although initially stripped of their masculine faculties, can, through “the value of work, self-reliance, and manly independence,” become self-made and independent figures in society.⁴⁴ In Douglass’s eyes, the nation’s preoccupation with self-made men was “irrefutable evidence of man’s innate and irrepressible humanism.”⁴⁵ The values that Douglass highlights in his speech, particularly in his discussion of what it takes to achieve “manly independence,” serve as important keys to understanding how Douglass structured his own quest for self-made independence in his *Narrative*.

⁴³ Yarborough, “Race, Violence, and Manhood: The Masculine Ideal in Frederick Douglass’s ‘The Heroic Slave,’” in *Frederick Douglass: New Literary and Historical Essays*, ed. Eric J. Sundquist (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1990), 172.

⁴⁴ Douglass, “The Trials and Triumphs of Self-Made Men: An Address Delivered in Halifax, England, on 4 January, 1860,” in *Frederick Douglass Papers*, series 1, volume 3, ed. John W. Blassingame and John R. McKivigan (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1985), 300.

⁴⁵ Waldo E. Martin, Jr., *The Mind of Frederick Douglass* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1984), 257.

Being a man who was himself once stripped of self-worth and independence, Douglass is sure to emphasize that the potential for self-made manhood is open to all—or all men, in any case—through capitalistic growth. In his speech Douglass voices that success, in spite of humble beginnings, could be achieved through “industry and application” and that its credit “belongs and must be ascribed to brave, honest, earnest, ceaseless heart and soul industry.”⁴⁶ While Douglass’s reference to “industry” calls for blacks to enact a personal program based in conscientiousness and hard work, he also alludes to the Second Industrial Revolution that America had been experiencing since 1850, when technological advances in transportation, such as railways and steamships, allowed for increased capitalistic growth. Indeed, the men Douglass highlights as models in his speech tend to display financial stability, where the “entrepreneurial myth” of American self-making configures money as a signifier for success.⁴⁷ It is not for nothing that, when regarding William Dietz, Douglass is sure to mention that Dietz became “the manager of an estate worth three million dollars.”⁴⁸ Such money-tinged references compound Douglass’s characterization of masculine agency as a distinctly “middle-class appeal,” where self-made independence is found through “a willful struggle to separate, leave origins behind, and move toward the places and goods whose possession denotes a place at society’s top rather than its bottom.”⁴⁹ To be self-made, according to Douglass, is to move vertically upward on the socioeconomic ladder, leaving the feminized origins of

⁴⁶ Douglass, “The Trials and Triumphs of Self-Made Men,” 294.

⁴⁷ James V. Catano, *Ragged Dicks: Masculinity, Steel, and the Rhetoric of the Self-Made Man* (Carbondale, IL: Southern Illinois University Press, 2001), 10.

⁴⁸ Douglass, “The Trials and Triumphs of Self-Made Men,” 296.

⁴⁹ Catano, *Ragged Dicks*, 158.

poverty behind as one grows increasingly masculine through financial independence.

One of the primary threats to Douglass's ideal of self-made manhood was the institution of slavery. Slavery's perversion of masculine self-making is explicated throughout Douglass's *Narrative*, where one of his central methods of critique against the institution is to expose its corruption of cultural gender norms. Utilizing the binary opposition between masculine and feminine that was generally accepted at the time—and that, indeed, was integral to Douglass's model of masculine self-making—Douglass depicts slavery as a corrupting force that warps this opposition, making men feminine and, in the case of the masters' wives, women masculine. If slavery, writes Norma Lozano-Jackson, “acts to join unnatural together and tear naturals apart,”⁵⁰ then, for Douglass, these naturals “torn apart” include the gender identities that assured only men would attain capitalistic power and independence.

Upon first reading his *Narrative*, the most noticeable way that Douglass utilizes gender norms to critique slavery is through his revealing of how the institution exploits the pure feminine form. The image of the victimized female body, argues Jenny Franchot, is set at the “emotional center” of Douglass's critique of the institution.⁵¹ He ends his very first chapter with a chilling, lurid account of the beating of his Aunt Esther/Hester, milking her victimization by Colonel Lloyd for all its exploitative potential. Before going into detail on her

⁵⁰ Lozano-Jackson, “The Heroic Voice in Black Slave Narratives,” 170.

⁵¹ Franchot, “The Punishment of Esther: Frederick Douglass and the Construction of the Feminine,” in *Frederick Douglass: New Literary and Historical Essays*, ed. Eric J. Sundquist (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1990), 141.

whipping, Douglass portrays his aunt as an exemplary model of the pure feminine: “a woman of noble form, and of graceful proportions,” he writes, “having very few equals, and fewer superiors, in personal appearance, among the colored or white women of our neighborhood.”⁵² Douglass’s description of Esther’s “noble form” and “graceful proportions” serves as an antecedent to his argument on slavery’s ravishment of the pure feminine, allowing his aunt’s subsequent exploitation by Auld to carry more destructive force. Lloyd, writes Douglass, stripped Esther

from neck to waist, leaving her neck, shoulders, and back, entirely naked. He then told her to cross her hands, calling her at the same time a d----d b----h. [...] He made her get upon the stool, and tied her hands to the hook. She now stood fair for his infernal purpose. Her arms were stretched up at their full length, so that she stood upon the ends of her toes. He then said to her, “Now, you d----d b----h, I’ll learn you how to disobey my orders!” and after rolling up his sleeves, he commenced to lay on the heavy cowskin, and soon the warm, red blood (amid heart-rending shrieks from her, and horrid oaths from him) came dripping to the floor.⁵³

Describing Esther as tied to a hook and standing “fair for his infernal purpose,” Douglass unquestionably taps into the bondage-fantasy elements of the scene, where the feminine form, initially “noble” and “graceful,” becomes an erotic and thus degraded object of male pleasure. Conveying Lloyd’s complete control of his aunt, Douglass essentially reduces Esther to her body parts—her neck, waist, shoulders, back, arms, hands, and even the “ends of her toes” are all cited—in order to portray her body’s objectification and “naked” exposure. The exploitative imagery is enhanced by Douglass’s sensual rhetoric, most prominently

⁵² Douglass, *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, An American Slave*, eds. John W. Blassingame, John R. McKivigan, and Peter P. Hinks (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2001), 16.

⁵³ Douglass, *Narrative*, 16.

demonstrated in his description of Esther's "warm, red blood"—a phrase that Douglass quotes again verbatim when depicting Thomas Auld's whipping of another helpless slave woman, "Henny," at a later point in the *Narrative*.⁵⁴ Henny, with her "naked shoulders" beaten by "heavy cowskin," functions, like Esther, as primarily a means for Douglass to portray the master's defilement of womanhood as among slavery's chief sins, corrupting the female's gendered role as a model of purity.

Granted, Douglass's depictions of Esther and Henny are not at all uncommon in the slave narrative tradition, where the female slave's exploitation finds a similarly exploitative dimension in the pages of other autobiographies by male ex-slaves. Limited by "the generic conventions of slave narratives" and "their conventional nineteenth-century male notions of woman's place," black women in slave narratives are generally stereotyped as "exploited beings," "utter victims," and represented solely in relation to their sexuality.⁵⁵ Portrayed exclusively as either a "hot-blooded, exotic whore" or a "cringing, terrified victim," the woman of the slave narrative is ultimately "not pure and thus not a model of womanhood."⁵⁶ By using sensual and sexually-charged imagery, as Douglass does in his *Narrative*, the slave narrative's depiction of the defiled woman takes on an additional sensationalistic flair, working to incite the chivalric—albeit sexist—values of its male readers. The female slave, her "model of womanhood" polluted in slavery, is exploited again for the abolitionist cause.

⁵⁴ Ibid., 44.

⁵⁵ Foster, *Witnessing Slavery*, xxx, xxxiii, xli.

⁵⁶ Ibid., 131.

Not only does Douglass highlight how slavery contaminates the gender of the female slave, but he also extends his critique of the institution's corruption of womanhood to the wives of his masters. Upon moving to the Aulds', Douglass presents Sophia similarly to Esther, highlighting the pure femininity that will soon be corrupted by slavery. Sophia—or simply “my mistress,” as Douglass called her—is described initially as “a woman of the kindest heart and finest feelings.” She possesses a face “made of heavenly smiles” and a voice of “tranquil music.”⁵⁷ Before encountering slavery, Sophia was “a pious, warm, and tender-hearted woman,” where there “was no sorrow or suffering for which she had not a tear.”⁵⁸ Douglass's preliminary depiction of Sophia Auld stresses her distinctly feminine characteristics; through his religious imagery—her “heavenly” smile, her “tranquil” voice—Douglass presents Sophia as nothing less than a pious, angelic being, just as all “proper” women should strive to be. Emphasizing her culturally appropriate place in the female-dominated profession of weaving, Douglass writes that “by constant application to her business, she had been in a good degree preserved from the blighting and dehumanizing effects of slavery.”⁵⁹ Away from slavery, Sophia remains located in her specified gender role: a compassionate, submissive wife, treating all with kindness and keeping to her feminized “business.”

After reinforcing Sophia's pure feminine state, Douglass proceeds to describe how his mistress is subsequently corrupted by the influence of slavery. “The fatal poison of irresponsible power was already in her hands,” writes

⁵⁷ Douglass, *Narrative*, 31.

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, 33-34.

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, 31.

Douglass, “and gradually commenced its infernal work.”⁶⁰ Douglass’s reference to slavery’s “infernal work” upon Sophia echoes his description of Colonel Lloyd’s “infernal purpose” for Esther, paralleling both women’s corruption under slavery. However, whereas Esther’s corruption is depicted as her loss of virginal purity, Sophia’s corruption is located in her possession of a power “irresponsible”—not merely because it rules over the lives of human beings, Douglass implies, but because it moreover causes her to adopt masculine traits. “Slavery soon proved its ability to divest [Sophia] of these heavenly qualities,” writes Douglass. “Under its influence, the tender heart became stone, and the lamb-like disposition gave way to one of tiger-like fierceness.”⁶¹ In his metaphorical use of “stone” and “tiger-like fierceness,” Douglass configures Sophia’s transformation under the influence of slavery as an exchange of feminine characteristics for ones distinctly masculine, consequently inducing her to deviate from her role as a submissive wife to her husband. “She now commenced to practice her husband’s precepts,” emphasizes Douglass. “She finally became even more violent in her opposition than her husband himself. She was not satisfied with simply doing as well as he had commanded; she seemed anxious to do better.”⁶² Not only is Sophia *equal* to her husband in her cruelty, Douglass argues, but she actually desires to *surpass* him; under the corrupting influence of slavery, the patriarchal structure is sabotaged by the wife’s attempts to break free from her feminized role.

Ironically, Sophia’s displacement from her feminized role parallels Douglass’s efforts, with a “tiger-like fierceness” of his own, to rebel against his

⁶⁰ Ibid.

⁶¹ Ibid., 34.

⁶² Ibid., 34.

objectified status as a slave—a status that, according to nineteenth-century norms, is distinctly feminine in its submission to slavery’s suppression of masculine independence. Douglass emphasizes the slave’s feminine identity when, in a later point in his *Narrative*, he attempts to induce his fellow slaves to escape. “I talked to them of our want of manhood, if we submitted to our enslavement without at least one noble effort to be free,” he writes, thereby contextualizing “manhood” as a noble opposition to one’s bondage.⁶³ Indeed, as Douglass makes very clear in a passage that directly precedes his escape, for a slave to remain content in his state is to directly deny his masculine worth:

I have found that, to make a contented slave, it is necessary to make a thoughtless one. It is necessary to darken his moral and mental vision, and, as far as possible, to annihilate the power of reason. He must be able to detect no inconsistencies in slavery; he must be made to feel that slavery is right; and he can be brought to that *only when he ceases to be a man*.⁶⁴

If we are to follow the logic of Douglass’s reasoning, the slave who “thoughtlessly” accepts his bondage consequently “ceases to be a man” and is by inference womanly in nature. The same institution that perverts the gender norms of womanhood—making the female slave impure and the slave mistress masculine—also makes the male slave feminine, lacking any motivation to rise up against his dependent role.

This forged equivalence between slave and female introduces one of the problematic ironies inherent in Douglass’s writing of his *Narrative*. As an author revisiting the period when he was an objectified slave, Douglass thereby risks casting himself as a feminine presence to his readers, where his body, although

⁶³ Ibid., 61.

⁶⁴ Ibid., 70, my emphasis.

not sexually exploited like Esther and Henny, remains nonetheless similarly objectified by his testimony of bondage. By reconstructing the past, Andrews writes, slaves had to “undergo a disquieting psychic immersion into their former selves as slaves,” where “a freeperson was forced to relive the most psychically charged moments of his or her past and to be reminded of thoughts and deeds about which he or she had come to feel very ambivalent.”⁶⁵ The troubling result of this “psychic immersion” into an ex-slave’s past is that, when written into narrative, the author must once again subject him or herself to a time when he or she had no subjective will. The autobiographical nature of the slave narrative and its emphasis on slavery’s dehumanizing effects consequently “threatens to reproduce the objectification of self that the ex-slave might have hoped to leave behind.”⁶⁶ For a slave narrator like Douglass, his primary dilemma is demonstrating slavery’s “objectification of self” without in turn losing his authoritative identity as an independent, masculine hero in the nineteenth-century autobiographical mode. Indeed, considering that one of the main purposes of his *Narrative* was to prove to skeptical Northern readers that he was once a slave, Douglass could not delve too deeply into slavery’s utter objectification of its victims, lest readers doubt the possibility that he could ever escape. As Henry Louis Gates puts it, Douglass’s dilemma lies in the conflicted requirement to argue “that the self of the enslaved had suffered no essential damage (and this is so that the authority the narrator claimed would not be diminished) and simultaneously that slavery did indeed work great damage upon

⁶⁵ Andrews, *To Tell a Free Story*, 7.

⁶⁶ Newbury, *Figuring Authorship in Antebellum America*, 106.

all who dwelled within it.” Douglass, according to Gates, solves this rhetorical paradox by arguing that although slavery “stopped slaves from actualizing their capacities, it did not in fact destroy them.”⁶⁷ Notwithstanding the white audience that seeks to emasculate him because of his racial makeup, the fact that Douglass’s capacities as a self-made man remain “unactualized” for the majority of his *Narrative* also retains the risk of presenting a protagonist that, due to his degraded position, is essentially feminine.

One way that Douglass strategically shields his masculine identity from the slave narrative’s depictions of objectification is by utilizing the exploited women in his *Narrative*, although not without some further damage to his masculine self-portrait. In her essay “The Punishment of Esther,” Jenny Franchot argues that Douglass retains his authoritative subjectivity by utilizing the sexually charged brutalization of women in his *Narrative* as a means to explicate slavery’s dehumanization without dehumanizing his own masculine role. The punishment given to female slaves like Esther, Franchot writes, allows Douglass “a temporary membership in the suffering body whose final function is to afford him a permanent escape from it,” his masculinity thus “linked to the black feminine through the narratives that mark his literate virility.”⁶⁸ To Douglass, Esther represents “not identity but difference,” allowing him to portray the humiliating effects of slavery while remaining steadfastly “outside the circle” of objectification.⁶⁹ Nevertheless, this association between Douglass’s masculinity

⁶⁷ Gates, *Figures in Black*, 111.

⁶⁸ Franchot, “The Punishment of Esther,” 141-42.

⁶⁹ Van Leer, “Reading Slavery,” 131-32.

and the black feminine still feminizes his subjectivity through his inability, like a true hero, to protect or save the victimized women he encounters.

By redirecting slavery's cruelty to the female body, Douglass may save his written body from the humiliating effects of slavery that he must describe, but the price of this literary maneuver is that his masculinity remains weakened and questioned by association. Rather than heroically coming to Esther's rescue, Douglass merely hides, like a frightened girl, passively observing her whipping.⁷⁰ Although Douglass's fearful reaction is understandable, considering he is a child at this point in the *Narrative*, the incident nevertheless explicates the feminine attributes of the slave identity—so in conflict with Douglass's masculine ideal—that confine both the slave and female to subservient positions under a patriarchal authority. According to the grammar of the dominant white culture, slavery functions as “manhood's inversion” and those who submit to its control are not really men at all.⁷¹ What counterpoints a slave's non-manhood is the master: a figure who “reserves to himself the masculine authority to generate meaning.”⁷² The symbolic masculinization of the slaveholder and its consequential feminization of his slaves is further compounded by male slaves' inability to assert patriarchal authority over their wives and children. Henry Bibb is particularly conscious of the humiliating effects of remaining powerless in the face of his master's brutality toward his wife, writing that

⁷⁰ Douglass, *Narrative*, 16-17.

⁷¹ Baptist, “The Absent Subject: African American Masculinity and Forced Migration to the Antebellum Plantation Frontier,” in *Southern Manhood: Perspectives on Masculinity in the Old South*, eds. Craig Thompson Friend and Lorri Glover (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2004), 138.

⁷² George P. Cunningham, “‘Called Into Existence’: Desire, Gender, and Voice in Frederick Douglass's *Narrative of 1845*,” *Differences* 1, no. 3 (1989): 114.

to live where I must be eye witness to her insults, scourgings and abuses, such as are common to be inflicted upon slaves, was more than I could bear. If my wife must be exposed to the insults and licentious passions of wicked slave-drivers and overseers; if she must bear the stripes of the lash laid on by an unmerciful tyrant; if this is to be done with impunity, which is frequently done by slaveholders and their abettors, Heaven forbid that I should be compelled to witness the sight.⁷³

As Bibb repeatedly emphasizes, it's not merely the abuse of his wife that he could not bear, but moreover the fact that he, as her emasculated husband, must witness this abuse and do nothing. Bibb's lament exemplifies the degrading manner in which the male slave's patriarchal role is trumped by that of his master, where any decisions he hopes to make—particularly to protect his family—could at any moment be “countermanded” by his owner.⁷⁴ In this sense, the male slave's feminization is ultimately signified in his failure to act as masculine protector, especially of his wife. As Blassingame puts it, “The most serious impediment to the man's acquisition of status in his family was his inability to protect his wife from the sexual advances of whites and the physical abuse of his master.”⁷⁵ Hence, by portraying scenes of exploitation like Esther's punishment in Douglass's *Narrative*, male slave narrators may objectify women, certainly, but they also indirectly objectify themselves, for the scenes underscore these male authors' failure as masculine figures to protect their women. Writing in a culture that defines masculinity not only by the elevation of self but also the protection of others, male slave narrators have to grapple with the fact that they too are feminized when writing of slavery.

⁷³ Bibb, *Narrative*, 42.

⁷⁴ John W. Blassingame, *The Slave Community: Plantation Life in the Antebellum South* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1972), 172.

⁷⁵ *Ibid.*

Even though Douglass risks feminizing his identity through the writing of his autobiography, he simultaneously finds a means to escape this feminized state through the anticipatory framework provided by the *Narrative*. If slavery, as Franchot puts it, “functions as feminized antithesis to a narrative whose insistence upon linear progress and aggressive individuation testifies to its masculine credentials,” then Douglass can use the inherently anticipatory, linear qualities of the slave narrative genre—as well as its relation to masculine autobiography as a whole—to oppose slavery’s femininity and his helplessness within it.⁷⁶ Utilizing the structure of the early American autobiographical genre, where the protagonist fluctuates between sin and salvation in his quest for masculine independence, Douglass finds a purposeful framework that both portrays his physical escape from slavery and actively resists symbolic objectification by contextualizing his past in the anticipated present.

One of Douglass’s primary utilizations of anticipation is inherent in the structural makeup of his narrative itself, where his choice as to *how* to sequentially order the events of his life into a unique “shape” remains just as integral as—if not also inseparable from—the content of these events. Hence, a distinction must be made between Douglass’s unexpressed life, which remains structured solely in private memory, and the strategic manner in which he subsequently shapes his memory into a working, metaphorical narrative. In their development of narratological theory in the beginning of the twentieth century, the Russian Formalists explicated such a distinction in all narratives, defining *fabula* as the chronological order of a story’s events—or, in Douglass’s

⁷⁶ Franchot, “The Punishment of Esther,” 148.

autobiographical sense, the actual chronology of his life—and *sjuzet* as the way this story is structured into a readable plot.⁷⁷ As is often the case, the chronological order of the *sjuzet* in a narrative may not necessarily follow the chronological order of the *fabula*. Indeed, the literary strength of any given narrative, particularly Douglass's autobiography, relates proportionally to how well the author reorders the unexpressed content of his or her *fabula* into a meaningful, dramatic *sjuzet*.

One of the most familiar ways in which *fabula* is reordered into *sjuzet* is through foreshadowing—namely, the anticipation of an event before its actual occurrence. Narrative is not simply about “incidents on the timeline,” asserts Cobley,⁷⁸ but is “most importantly about ‘expectation’ and ‘memory’: reading the end in the beginning and reading the beginning in the end.”⁷⁸ In the slave narrative, where the author's remembered self moves from a place of “innocence lost” to “freedom obtained” (as explicated in Foster's mythological pattern), foreshadowing is clearly embedded in the genre's narratological structure. Because the slave narrative is, by its publication, a testimonial to its author's success in escaping from slavery, this escape imbricates every word he or she writes. Even during its descriptions of the direst circumstances, the slave narrative foreshadows the ex-slave's liberation via the very printed existence of these descriptions. For the majority of slave narratives, the ex-slave's eventual “freedom obtained” is signified not in the literal significations of the text—which often describe moments of intense hopelessness for the author—but in the

⁷⁷ Paul Cobley, *Narrative* (London: Routledge, 2001), 15.

⁷⁸ *Ibid.*, 19.

spatial presence of the signifiers themselves, aided by the readers' implicit foreknowledge that the ex-slave's escape is inevitable, if not also integral, to the genre.

The term *foreshadowing*, however, carries implications related strictly to the dramatic development of a narrative's plot and is thus less applicable to how a narrative is structured as a spatial chronotope. In his studies on narrative structure, French critic Gérard Genette offers the idea of *prolepsis* as a more narratologically-oriented method of anticipation. Prolepsis, as defined by Genette, is "any narrative maneuver that consists of narrating or evoking in advance an event that will take place later."⁷⁹ The characteristics of prolepsis, Genette adds, may vary depending upon how far the prolepsis reaches—extending from within to even outside the narrative's fabula—and the extent (or duration) of this reach.⁸⁰ These multiple traits grant the prolepsis a higher degree of expressivity than the more dramatically-loaded term *foreshadowing*; prolepsis not only carries the content-oriented aspects of plot development that are embedded in *foreshadowing* but also highlights the structural manner in which this plot is ordered as a distinct, observable permutation of events.

In Douglass's *Narrative* three explicit examples of prolepsis occur at relatively early stages in his remembered history, referencing his future authorial self at instances where escape is still far from his narrated consciousness. Douglass's first self-reference occurs near the end of the second chapter, when he comments on the enduring emotional power of slave songs:

⁷⁹ Genette, *Narrative Discourse: An Essay in Method*, trans. Jane E. Lewin (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1980), 40.

⁸⁰ Genette, *Narrative Discourse*, 49-50, 68.

The hearing of those wild notes always depressed my spirit, and filled me with ineffable sadness. I have frequently found myself in tears while hearing them. The mere recurrence to those songs, even now, afflicts me; and while I am writing these lines, an expression of feeling has already found its way down my cheek.⁸¹

Apart from its obvious significance as an allusion to his role as a writer, Douglass's expression "while I am writing these lines" is crucial in the structural sense that it interrupts, or intrudes upon, Douglass's retrospective timeframe—his *fabula*—and thereby becomes part of his *sjuzet*'s distinctly proleptic order. Douglass makes a similar reference to his anticipated role as an author three chapters later when describing his harsh treatment at Colonel Lloyd's plantation during the winter months:

I must have perished with cold, but that, the coldest nights, I used to steal a bag which was used to carrying corn to the mill. I would crawl into this bag, and there sleep on the cold, damp, clay floor, with my head in and feet out. My feet have been so cracked with the frost, that the pen with which I am writing might be laid in the gashes.⁸²

Again, Douglass's role as a writer is proleptically alluded to here—"the pen with which I am writing"—in a manner that adds rhetorical power to his situation by physically linking his future writing utensil to the permanent afflictions of slavery. Finally, a third act of prolepsis occurs just a few pages later, as Douglass discusses his departure from Tuckahoe:

I look upon my departure from Colonel Lloyd's plantation as one of the most interesting events of my life. It is possible, and even quite probable, that but for the mere circumstance of being removed from that plantation to Baltimore, I should have to-day, instead of being seated here by my own table, in the enjoyment of freedom and the

⁸¹ Douglass, *Narrative*, 20.

⁸² *Ibid.*, 28.

happiness of home, writing this Narrative, been confined in the galling chains of slavery.⁸³

This third self-reference, like the previous invocation of the “pen with which I am writing,” retains Douglass’s explicit invocation of his present physical materials—“being seated here by my own table, in the enjoyment of freedom and the happiness of home”—while even self-reflexively anticipating the writing of his *Narrative* itself. The reference also makes explicit a condition that, in their allusions to Douglass’s independence as a writer, permeates the previous two self-references: this is a masculine self, living “in the enjoyment of freedom,” and thus a self that the narrated, enslaved Douglass, through the course of his autobiography, will continuously anticipate throughout his autobiography.

These instances of prolepsis are not simply dramatic flourishes but integral devices that Douglass utilizes to maintain his masculine identity in a context that threatens to feminize him. By calling attention to his future role as an author at these early points in his *Narrative*, Douglass establishes an authoritative distance between his role as narrator and the events being narrated. The primary advantage of maintaining this observational viewpoint is that it essentially permits Douglass to feminize slavery as an institution in opposition to his autonomous self. Just as he describes the initial feminine purity of Esther and Sophia in order to heighten their eventual corruption, Douglass applies a similar rhetorical strategy to his depiction of slavery, analytically structuring the institution as a stagnant, cyclical body that he can subsequently exploit with his linear, progressive anticipation for freedom.

⁸³ Ibid., 30.

Douglass first suggests the cyclical nature of slavery in the brief discussion of his birthday that opens his autobiography:

I have no accurate knowledge of my age, never having seen any authentic record containing it. By far the larger part of the slaves know as little of their ages as horses know of theirs, and it is the wish of most masters within my knowledge to keep their slaves thus ignorant.⁸⁴

By keeping slaves ignorant of their birthdays, Douglass alludes to the manner in which slaveholders trap their slaves in a psychological timeframe that is nonlinear. Slaves are caught in a state where, according to Orlando Paterson, they are “not allowed freely to integrate the experience of their ancestors into their lives, to inform their understanding of social reality with the inherited meanings of their natural forebears, or to anchor the living present in any conscious community of memory.”⁸⁵ Without a specific age to mark his or her chronological movement over the years, the measure of a slave’s life is essentially reduced, like that of livestock, to the momentary present, leaving no “time” for retrospection of their heritage or, more importantly, anticipation of a possible future heritage away from slavery.

Douglass further analyzes the cyclical nature of slavery during an extensive discussion of the plantation winter holidays. Falling in the period between Christmas and New Year’s Day, slaves typically were granted relatively greater “freedom” on these days, where feasts were prepared, games were played, and masters lowered restrictions on interplantation visits.⁸⁶ According to

⁸⁴ Ibid., 13.

⁸⁵ Paterson, *Slavery and Social Death: A Comparative Study* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1982), 5.

⁸⁶ Blassingame, *The Slave Community*, 106-07.

Harriet Jacobs, the annual winter holiday provided relief and familial warmth in the slave community; aware of the possibility of being separated at the start of the next year, slave mothers tried to “gladden the hearts of their little ones” during this time, and enslaved families generally made the most of their brief time together.⁸⁷ By contrast, Douglass shows no regard for such displays of affection and sentimentality, choosing instead to describe the festivities as an outsider so that he might analyze how the holidays are, in opposition to Jacobs’s tender description, actually “part and parcel of the gross fraud, wrong, and inhumanity of slavery.”⁸⁸ Noting the manner in which masters encourage slaves to get drunk during the period, Douglass represents the holidays as a kind of safety-valve used by slaveholders in order to “carry off the rebellious spirit of enslaved humanity.”⁸⁹ Slaveholders, he writes,

like to have their slaves spend those days just in such a manner as to make them as glad of their ending as of their beginning. Their object seems to be, to disgust their slaves with freedom, by plunging them into the lowest depths of dissipation. [...] So, when the holidays ended, we staggered up from the filth of our wallowing, took a long breath, and marched to the field,--feeling, upon the whole, rather glad to go, from what our master had deceived us into a belief was freedom, back to the arms of slavery.⁹⁰

This exploitation of “freedom,” controlled by the masters through induced drunkenness, works to keep slaves within a stagnant, time-based bondage, where they are led to believe, to paraphrase Douglass, that their ends are no better than their beginnings. Slavery, according to James H. Evans, perpetuated the notion that slaves are “associated with nature rather than civilization, and

⁸⁷ Jacobs, *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*, 179-181.

⁸⁸ Douglass, *Narrative*, 56.

⁸⁹ *Ibid.*, 55.

⁹⁰ *Ibid.*, 56.

their time, like that of animals, is based on natural seasonal cycles.”⁹¹ In their cyclic, seasonal recurrence, the winter holidays provide for Douglass an apt demonstration of the way slaveholders grant their slaves a falsified, diluted time of freedom—one that is sporadic rather than continuous—in order to disorient routine and stifle any potential anticipation for liberty.

What provides Douglass a means of breaking out of slavery’s cyclical structure is the progressive, anticipatory power of literacy. Literacy functions in his *Narrative* as the masculine means by which Douglass exploits the feminizing structure of slavery, subverting its cyclical pattern with a linear model destined to freedom. He first realizes the potential of literacy when he overhears his master Hugh Auld warning Sophia about the dangers of teaching slaves to read. “If you give a nigger an inch,” Hugh says, “he will take an ell.”⁹² However, Hugh unwittingly gives Douglass an “inch” through the very conditional premise of his statement. By introducing a premise (“If you give...”), the possibility of a future conclusion (“...he will take an ell”) becomes inevitable by means of temporal logic. Rather than “reversing Douglass’s direction,” Auld’s warning “not only speeds him along but accurately prophesies his destination and means of travel.”⁹³ Grasping both the logical potential of Hugh’s statement as well as its connection to his master’s attempts to control him, Douglass writes that “the argument which he so warmly urged, against my learning to read, only served to inspire me with a desire and determination to learn.”⁹⁴ It is this “desire and

⁹¹ Evans, *Spiritual Empowerment in Afro-American Literature*, 27.

⁹² Douglass, *Narrative*, 31.

⁹³ Van Leer, “Reading Slavery,” 127.

⁹⁴ Douglass, *Narrative*, 32.

determination” that provides Douglass with an anticipatory awareness of the specific steps he must take—obtaining literacy in opposition to his master’s will—to upset the cyclical power structure of slavery.

At this point in his *Narrative* Douglass’s entire psychology as a slave is transformed. The liberating potential of literacy calls into being what Douglass calls “an entirely new train of thought” and throws him into what Lewis R. Gordon identifies as “a process of imagining himself beyond his condition.”⁹⁵ Significantly, Douglass’s imaginative anticipation is performed through a process of negation, wherein he plans to achieve liberty by acting in opposition to his master’s will. “What he most dreaded, that I desired,” asserts Douglass. “What he most loved, that I most hated. That which to him was a great evil, to be carefully shunned, was to me a great good, to be diligently sought.”⁹⁶ Douglass’s vow contextualizes his rebellion within a reversal of accepted binary oppositions in the slave culture—a culture that, as he repeatedly implies in his *Narrative*, has also perverted the traditional dichotomies related to gender roles. Through literacy, however, Douglass finds a way to reverse slavery’s “unnatural” binaries and henceforth intrude upon the institution’s feminizing, static body with a linear projection to his future masculine state.

Douglass’s literary epiphany allows him, in a sense, to view himself as a protagonist in his own life narrative, anticipating a future climax of freedom by the premise of imagining this freedom. Paul Ricœur emphasizes how, when

⁹⁵ Ibid., 31; Gordon, “Douglass as an Existentialist,” in *Frederick Douglass: A Critical Reader*, eds. Bill E. Lawson and Frank M. Kirkland (Malden: Blackwell Publishers Inc., 1999), 215.

⁹⁶ Douglass, *Narrative*, 32.

projecting possible outcomes to one's future, "imagination is involved in the very process of motivation." Imagination, continues Ricœur,

offers the common space for the comparison and mediation of terms as heterogeneous as the force that pushes as if from behind, the attraction that seduces as if from in front, and the reasons that legitimate and form a ground as if from beneath. It is in a form of the imaginary that the common "dispositional" element is able to be represented in practical terms, allowing us to distinguish, on the one hand, between a physically compelling cause and a motive and, on the other hand, between a motive and a logically compelling reason.⁹⁷

In other words, Douglass's sudden surge of imagination, triggered by the "physically compelling cause" of his dire state in slavery and by the "logically compelling reason" inherent in Auld's warning, allows him to clear a practical, grounded pathway to a possible freedom. Inspired by his discovery of literacy, his lift itself becomes a textual model, governed by the same imaginary rules that push a text to a projected destination. Hence, Douglass's anticipation through literacy bridges a pointed correlation between his narrated life and his *Narrative* itself. Slave narratives, writes Gates, "not only describe the voyage but also enact the voyage so that their content is primarily a reflection of their literary method," thereby possessing "a structure in which the writer and the subject merge into the stream of language."⁹⁸ Douglass's connection of literacy to anticipation aptly illustrates Gates's theory, since it fuses Douglass's anticipatory psyche as a slave subject with the anticipatory traits inherent in narrative as an expressive, "pathway"-forging structure. The narrative form, as Peter Brooks argues, is naturally anticipatory, driven by a "desire" for conclusions; narrative, in

⁹⁷ Ricœur, *From Text to Action: Essays in Hermeneutics, II*, trans. Kathleen Blamey and John B. Thompson (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 1991), 178.

⁹⁸ Gates, *Figures in Black*, 86.

fact, has no contextual framework *without* this conclusion. “If the motor of narrative is desire, totalizing, building ever-larger units of meaning,” Brooks writes, “[then] the ultimate determinants of meaning lie *at the end*, and narrative desire is ultimately, inexorably, desire *for the end*.”⁹⁹ Ultimately, this desire—this projection towards the narrative’s end—forges an interdependent relationship with the structure of the narrative; it “borrows the narrative’s structuring power and the narrative receives the project’s capacity for anticipating.”¹⁰⁰ Douglass’s content (his anticipation, sparked by literacy) and form (his narrative structure, created through this same literacy) thus “stream” together in his autobiography, complementing one another and even working together to evoke the very real psychological projection that Douglass, not to mention other slaves, must adopt in order to escape from slavery.

By setting forth a path to eventual freedom, Douglass’s imaginative projection essentially serves as its own self-fulfilling prophecy. Mark Currie, in his expansion of Genette’s narratological theory of prolepsis, defines this self-fulfilling potential of anticipation as *performative prolepsis*. Currie likens the performative prolepsis of reading to the way that human beings, as subjective “protagonists” of their own lives, structure their anticipated desires:

Performative prolepsis produces the future in the act of envisaging it, so that the possible transforms itself into the actual. It does so in a range of modes and moods which can be placed somewhere on a scale between fear and hope. These two modes of protention, fear and hope, clearly operate as much in the reading of a fictional narrative as they do in the everyday projections we make into our

⁹⁹ Brooks, *Reading for the Plot*, 52.

¹⁰⁰ Ricœur, *From Text to Action*, 177.

future, in our realisations [sic] and evasions of fearful outcomes, or our fulfilled and dashed hopes.¹⁰¹

Currie's discussion of performative prolepsis underscores the deep, psychological connection—as well as tension—between Douglass's actions and his metaphorical projection of these actions into an anticipatory “narrative” of success. Although his anticipation of freedom can work to fulfill its own projection, Douglass's actions still operate within Currie's dualistic scale between “fear and hope”: fear that his anticipation for freedom might be for nothing, but hope that it might actually come to be.

The existential dilemma cited by Currie is revealed in Douglass's *Narrative* when, soon after his literary epiphany, Douglass explains how his anticipatory awareness of a possible better state only increases consciousness of his current “wretched condition” as a slave. This unfulfilled hope, he laments,

had given me a view of my wretched condition, without a remedy. It opened my eyes to a horrible pit, but to no ladder upon which to get out. In moments of agony, I envied my fellow-slaves for their stupidity. I have often wished myself a beast. I preferred the condition of the meanest reptile to my own. Any thing, no matter what, to get rid of thinking! It was this everlasting thinking of my condition that tormented me. There was no getting rid of it. It was pressed upon me by every object within sight or hearing, animate or inanimate. The silver trump of freedom had roused my soul to eternal wakefulness.¹⁰²

Believing that ignorance is better than knowledge for the slave, at least at this dire period in his *Narrative*, Douglass attempts to repress his anticipatory yearning for freedom, wishing himself instead “a beast.” Later, while working under the slavedriver Covey, Douglass again remarks on his devalued state in a

¹⁰¹ Currie, *About Time: Narrative, Fiction and the Philosophy of Time* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2007), 44.

¹⁰² Douglass, *Narrative*, 35-36.

passage that explicitly invokes Currie's notion of performative prolepsis as a state that exists on a "scale between fear and hope":

At times I would rise up, a flash of energetic freedom would dart through my soul, accompanied with a faint beam of hope, that flickered for a moment, and then vanished. I sank down again, mourning over my wretched condition. I was sometimes prompted to take my life, and that of Covey, but was prevented by a combination of hope and fear. My sufferings on this plantation seem now like a dream than a stern reality.¹⁰³

Although it is not strong enough to prompt him to commit suicide, Douglass's fear—that his desire for freedom is irrational, that his projection is all in vain—nevertheless outweighs his hope. His torment, momentarily lacking the strength of imaginative projection, echoes fellow slave narrator Henry Bibb's lament that the "idea of utter helplessness, in perpetual bondage, is the more distressing, as there is no period even with the remotest generation when it shall terminate."¹⁰⁴ Douglass's prolepsis has not yet become fully performative but exists merely as an unfulfilled dream that, ironically, constantly torments him into a state of "eternal wakefulness."

What Douglass eventually comes to realize as a slave is that the act of anticipation can indeed work to fulfill itself, and that the very imagining of a better condition can in itself grant Douglass the anticipatory power to move forward to that condition. Douglass gradually adopts what Ricœur terms a self-willed "I can":

[I]t is in the realm of the imaginary that I try out my power to act, that I measure the scope of "I can." I impute my own power to myself, as the agent of my own action, only by depicting it to myself in the form of imaginative variations on the theme of "I could," even "I could have done otherwise, if I had wanted to." [...] What is essential from a phenomenological point of view is that I take

¹⁰³ Ibid., 49.

¹⁰⁴ Bibb, *Narrative*, 18.

possession of the immediate certainty of my power only through the imaginative variations that mediate this certainty.¹⁰⁵

Douglass's understanding of the performative function of prolepsis—this awareness that his “imaginative variations” of future escape consequentially mediate this very will to escape—is evident at a later point in his autobiography when he reflects on the motivation, rather than depression, that anticipation provides him. Unlike the emotional duress he initially experiences upon dwelling on possible freedom, Douglass now utilizes his knowledge to anticipate and even plan for his eventual escape from slavery:

It cannot be that I shall live and die a slave. I will take to the water. The very bay shall yet bear me into freedom. The steamboats steered in a north-east course from North Point. I will do the same; and when I get to the head of the bay, I will turn my canoe adrift, and walk straight through Delaware into Pennsylvania.¹⁰⁶

His proleptic yearning for freedom now in performative mode, Douglass is able to reconcile himself with his current condition in slavery by remembering that his time in this devalued state is short:

Meanwhile, I will try to bear up under the yoke. I am not the only slave in the world. Why should I fret? I can bear as much as any of them. Besides, I am a boy, and all boys are bound to some one. It may be that my misery in slavery will only increase my happiness when I get free. There is a better day coming.¹⁰⁷

Rather than permitting knowledge of a potential happiness to increase his current misery, as it did earlier in his *Narrative*, Douglass inverts this premise so that his current misery now increases his future happiness. Douglass has begun what Foster terms the slave's “psychological escape,” where “the actualization is

¹⁰⁵ Ricœur, *From Text to Action*, 178.

¹⁰⁶ Douglass, *Narrative*, 50.

¹⁰⁷ *Ibid.*

simply a matter of time.”¹⁰⁸ His escape is indeed “a matter of time”—it is motivated by an anticipated future that, when considered as inevitable, has the power to affect the present, as miserable and abusive as it may be. The moment Douglass declares his “better day coming,” freedom is no longer a hopeful *if* but a definite *when*.

Because Douglass’s *Narrative* belongs to the masculine autobiographical tradition, his performative prolepsis, once set into motion, cannot simply fulfill itself through quiet endurance but must demonstrate its independence through active, violent resistance against his masters. “For Douglass,” writes Jeffrey B. Leak, “there exists a correlation between his physical defense and manhood, as he perceives the rebirth of his manhood through violence.”¹⁰⁹ The slaveholders whom Douglass chooses to directly resist, however, must be worthy opponents and equally masculine to Douglass, so that his anticipated victory is appropriately depicted as noble and heroic. For example, he finds little use in resisting a slaveholder like Thomas Auld, son-in-law of Hugh, whose primary weakness, according to Douglass, is his lack of masculinity. Thomas is portrayed as “cruel, but cowardly”; he commands, but “without firmness”; he is a person who does “nothing of himself,” lacking the stable, consistent mannerisms that traditional manhood requires. Thomas’s ultimate sin, as Douglass sees it, is his failure to earn the respect from his slaves that a “true” master would through his masculine values. “He wished to have us call him master, but lacked the firmness necessary to command us to do so,” writes Douglass. “His wife used to insist

¹⁰⁸ Foster, *Witnessing Slavery*, 120.

¹⁰⁹ Leak, *Racial Myths and Masculinity in African American Literature* (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 2005), 11.

upon our calling him so, but to no purpose.”¹¹⁰ This final exposure of Thomas’s lack of manhood, which devalues his masculine role by having his wife speak for him, reflects Douglass’s similar criticism of Hugh and Sophia Auld, whose gendered roles were set askew by slavery’s corrupting influence. It is not surprising that Douglass, whose journey to freedom he models as a paradigm of masculine self-making, remarks some passages later that he and Thomas “had quite a number of differences.”¹¹¹ These differences do not merely include the fact that one is a slave and the other a master; they are additionally apparent, as Douglass repeatedly stresses, in their modeling of appropriate gender roles.

In contrast to Thomas Auld, Douglass finds an equal match in the more masculine character of Edward Covey, the slavedriver with a reputation for “nigger-breaking” whom Douglass is sent to live with for one year. “Mr. Covey was one of the few slaveholders who could and did work with his hands,” he writes. “He was a hard-working man.”¹¹² Douglass’s attention to Covey’s masculine qualities serves a rhetorical purpose similar to his initial description of Esther and Sophia’s feminine ones: by positioning Covey within his proper gendered role at the outset, this will make Covey’s eventual loss of his position all the more subservient to Douglass’s masculine-heroic theme. Indeed, Douglass’s fight with Covey occasions his immortal declaration, “You have seen how a man was made a slave; you shall see how a slave was made a man.”¹¹³ His declaration’s reliance on chiasmus—a rhetorical strategy of reversal—is

¹¹⁰ Douglass, *Narrative*, 43.

¹¹¹ *Ibid.*, 45.

¹¹² *Ibid.*, 47.

¹¹³ *Ibid.*, 50.

significant in that it connects Douglass's personal motivation with a literary strategy that is inherently dualistic. Putting into active practice his vow to perform the opposite maneuvers of his master Hugh Auld, Douglass now anticipates the reversal of his own feminized state as a slave and makes it clear that, in becoming a *man*, this reversal will be a decidedly masculine one. Douglass's chiasmus, from man-made-a-slave to slave-made-a-man, configures his victory in gendered oppositions, making his rebellion not necessarily deconstructive but rather one that simply reverses the binary codes already established in his culture.

By declaring his manhood in anticipation of his battle with Covey, Douglass's famous declaration integrally links his masculine identity with one of the key instances of performative prolepsis in his *Narrative*. Considering that this declaration occurs immediately after Douglass's extensive discussion of his projected "future happiness," one can reasonably assume that this prolepsis is just as psychologically performative as it is structurally anticipatory: it does not merely provide foreshadowing for the reader; more importantly, it shows Douglass projecting his own victory even before it occurs, thereby granting him the motivational force to fulfill this victory. At the end of his long, physical struggle with his de-facto master, Douglass writes that his victory over Covey is one that both "revived within me a sense of my own manhood" and "recalled the departed self-confidence, and inspired me again with a determination to be free."¹¹⁴ Here, Douglass suggests that his anticipation to escape is the direct result of his

¹¹⁴ Ibid., 54.

masculinity—without his “revived manhood,” he has no determination. He continues:

I felt as I never felt before. It was a glorious resurrection, from the tomb of slavery, to the heaven of freedom. My long-crushed spirit rose, cowardice departed, bold defiance took its place; and I now resolved that, however long I might remain a slave in form, the day had passed forever when I could be a slave in fact.¹¹⁵

Douglass’s description of himself as a slave “in form” but not “in fact” exemplifies his prolepsis in full performative mode. At this point his future, and thus his masculinity, is predetermined, made all the more certain in Douglass’s evocation of the dualistic spiritual framework—“from the tomb of slavery, to the heaven of freedom”—that permeates nineteenth-century slave narratives. Yet what stands Douglass apart from his contemporaries is that he locates his “glorious resurrection” within the masculine victory which grants him the motivation to anticipate his escape over the escape itself. In proclaiming his liberation before it is actualized, Douglass suggests that his projection to freedom—his performative prolepsis—is more significant than the fulfillment of this projection “in form,” since the projection itself fulfills his freedom “in fact.” Douglass’s fight with Covey does not provide any new spiritual epiphany but “merely hastens his progress along a road already taken.”¹¹⁶ Once Douglass’s projection of his victory over Covey is made, this actualized conquest is inevitable and thus nothing more than a natural extension of his projection, just as his projection of future escape is preordained the moment he allows this projection to steer him to its destiny.

¹¹⁵ Ibid.

¹¹⁶ Van Leer, “Reading Slavery,” 127.

Aside from demonstrating the performative power of anticipation, one practical reason for relocating his epiphany of freedom before its actualization is that he must keep the details of this actualization—i.e., his escape from slavery—concealed in his *Narrative*. Attributing his silence to a desire to not expose the escape methods of other fugitive slaves, as well as to keep his aides from being “involved in the most embarrassing difficulties,” Douglass thereby obfuscates the very event that his entire autobiography anticipates.¹¹⁷ However, his silence on the details of his escape only reemphasizes the importance of his anticipation over his actualization. Douglass, in other words, does not need to portray the details of his escape, since his determination to escape after defeating Covey is sufficient to meet the structural requirements of his genre. Even though he refuses to remark on his escape, Douglass still adheres to the slave narrative’s mythological pattern—and even further masculinizes it—by locating his “redemption” in his heroic scuffle with Covey rather than in the comparatively more mundane details of his escape.

In relation to the masculine qualities of his *Narrative*, the other unmentioned benefit of obscuring the details of his escape is that it allows Douglass to conceal how his wife Anna aided his flight to freedom—a fact that would diminish the theme of self-made, masculine independence integral to Douglass’s autobiography. Although Douglass makes no mention of her assistance, modern studies have addressed how Anna, despite being illiterate, played a substantial role in her husband’s escape. Anna not only sold a featherbed to help pay for her husband’s journey but also, after suggesting that

¹¹⁷ Douglass, *Narrative*, 70.

Douglass disguise himself as a sailor, altered his clothing so that he could properly disguise himself.¹¹⁸ Just as “the ex-slave by refusing to narrate certain historical events reconstructs his history by his own authority,” Douglass’s refusal to mention his wife’s integral role helps to reconstruct his feminized past into a masculine model of self-made independence.¹¹⁹ Anna’s presence, after all, would disrupt and unnecessarily complicate his *Narrative*’s dualistic model, which relies on a distinct opposition between feminine slavery and masculinized freedom. Indeed, Anna’s illiteracy alone threatens to supersede Douglass’s primary theme of independence via literacy; it problematically suggests that knowing how to read and write is perhaps not all it takes to escape from slavery and that perhaps also the help and assistance of others, whether they be illiterate or female or both, remain vital to Douglass’s success.

Granted, Anna’s absence could certainly be rationalized as a consequence of Douglass’s stated reasons to not provide details of his escape, particularly his refusal to provide slaveholders any hints that might aid fugitives’ recapture. However, this does not explain Douglass’s refusal to cite his wife’s assistance in subsequent autobiographies, even in his postbellum *Life and Times of Frederick Douglass*, when being cautious about exposing slaves’ secrets was no longer necessary. Even after slavery is abolished, Douglass prefers to keep Anna outside of the public view—an absence that also applies to the other females in Douglass’s life, who, according to Franchot, “rarely speak at all.”¹²⁰ Females’ conspicuous absence in Douglass’s autobiographies parallels the

¹¹⁸ William S. McFeely, *Frederick Douglass* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, Inc., 1991), 70.

¹¹⁹ Lozano-Jackson, “The Heroic Voice in Black Slave Narratives,” 10.

¹²⁰ Franchot, “The Punishment of Esther,” 151.

efforts of Benjamin Franklin and other self-made male autobiographers to delimit the women's place to the privacy of domesticity.¹²¹ The American autobiography, writes Jill Ker Conway, "requires using a language which denigrates the feminine and [uses] a genre which celebrates the experience of the atomistic Western male hero."¹²² In such a masculine literary field, Douglass can easily and naturally confine Anna—if not all the women in his life—to an inconsequentially passive role, setting them apart from and irrelevant to the subjective tribulations and victories of his life.

Although Anna's absence may contribute to the self-made thematic elements of Douglass's *Narrative*, where his imaginative, proleptic projection toward the future is configured as solely responsible for his independence from slavery, Douglass cannot escape the fact that his first autobiography remains implicitly collaborative due to the political requirements of the genre. Douglass's status as an abolitionist and author, anticipated in the three instances of prolepsis referenced earlier, introduces a third type of prolepsis at work in his *Narrative*, one that is distinctly rhetorical in nature. Currie defines *rhetorical prolepsis* as "a form of anticipation which takes place between the time locus of the narrator and the time locus of the reader," with its most classical form being "anticipation of an objection and the preclusion of that objection by incorporating a counter-argument in the discourse."¹²³ As already demonstrated, Douglass as an enslaved subject engages in rhetorical prolepsis when he counters his

¹²¹ Rafia Zafar, "Franklinian Douglass: The Afro-American as Representative Man," in *Frederick Douglass: New Literary and Historical Essays*, ed. Eric J. Sundquist (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1990), 109.

¹²² Conway, *When Memory Speaks*, 3.

¹²³ Currie, *About Time*, 31.

present misery with the argument that it will only increase his future happiness. However, it is Douglass the writer who especially utilizes rhetorical prolepsis—the Douglass who, although resting in the “comfort and happiness of home,” must nonetheless face a prejudiced and skeptical reading public.

One of the primary objections brought against Douglass by his readers that he must necessarily and rhetorically anticipate is his authenticity as a fugitive slave. He counters this objection by beginning his *Narrative* with opening statements by William Lloyd Garrison and Wendell Phillips, Douglass’s personal white “sponsors.” Garrison’s and Phillips’ letters “afforded powerful confirmation of Douglass’s ‘many sufferings’ and his several attainments,” thereby providing his text validity.¹²⁴ In regards to Douglass’s utilization of his narratological structure to metaphorically express his journey towards independence, Garrison and Phillips’s opening statements substantially intrude upon this expressive sjuzet: upon reading the *Narrative*, readers first encounter not the triumphant Douglass but the statements of two white abolitionists representing him. Although Douglass utilizes instances of prolepsis at early points in his autobiography to anticipate his eventual independence, this independence is superseded by his sponsors’ letters of testimony, which, although exterior to the central narrative, nevertheless foreshadow a certain dependency in Douglass’s initial career as an abolitionist and ultimately signify Garrison and Phillips’s implicit authority over Douglass’s first autobiography.

Douglass’s collaborative dependency on others is especially apparent in the apologetic appendix that closes his *Narrative*. Utilizing rhetorical prolepsis,

¹²⁴ Blassingame, ed., Introduction to *Narrative*, xxiii.

Douglass counters any readers' probable objection that he is "an opponent of all religion" by assuring them that he is only critical of "slaveholding religion."

Douglass defends himself by asserting that

between the Christianity of this land, and the Christianity of Christ, I recognize the widest possible difference—so wide, that to receive the one as good, pure, and holy, is of necessity to reject the other as bad, corrupt, and wicked. To be the friend of the one, is of necessity to be the enemy of the other. I love the pure, peaceable, and impartial Christianity of Christ: I therefore hate the corrupt, slaveholding, women-whipping, cradle-plundering, partial and hypocritical Christianity of this land.¹²⁵

Douglass's remarks illustrate how, even when being required to defend his *Narrative*, he still manages to retain the central strategic techniques utilized throughout his autobiography. Like his depictions of Esther and Henny, Douglass's mention of the "women-whipping" nature of slavery centers his critique of slavery on its exploitation of women. Moreover, the passage provides an exemplary model of Douglass's reliance on binary oppositions as a strategic literary device. In his division of Christianity between the "good, pure, and holy" and the "bad, corrupt, and wicked," Douglass positions a dualistic moral structure where it is not merely optional but rather "of necessity" to "be the friend of the one" and to "be the enemy of the other." Reflecting the similarly oppositional division between slavery and manhood that permeates his autobiography, Douglass's analysis of American Christianity is based in binary absolutes, allowing no in-betweens.

The collaborative nature of Douglass's *Narrative* may reflect the discursive limitations of the slave narrative genre, particularly in the case of Douglass's

¹²⁵ Douglass, *Narrative*, 81.

personal agenda of self-made independence, but as the necessitated apology of his appendix demonstrates, Douglass still finds ways to work within such limitations to address his primary concerns. Despite whatever restrictions are placed upon his *Narrative* by his editors, Douglass sustains his performative prolepsis beyond the pages of his autobiography itself and projects himself forward to a place where he, having already self-willed himself out of slavery, will soon obtain further independence and success. His *Narrative*, as James V. Catano puts it, functions as “the ultimate in rhetorical self-enactment,” where its publication “leads to international recognition, social effectiveness in the war on slavery, eventual governmental positions, and comfortable wealth.”¹²⁶ The politicized restrictions of the slave narrative genre may make it a questionable source for authentic autobiography, but for Douglass, whose personal and political goals were often indistinguishable from one another, his *Narrative* serves as his first anticipatory step toward self-made manhood, not only as a free man but also as a wealthy, independent one.

Douglass’s eventual accomplishments were first initiated soon after the publication of his *Narrative*, when he made a point of divorcing himself from the Garrisons’ assistance and many of those who first sponsored him. After buying his freedom in England with the financial help of some abolitionist friends, Douglass returned to the U.S. with the intent of starting his own independently run newspaper, *The North Star*. This plan of action was met with direct disapproval from Garrison, who felt his own paper, *The Liberator*, was sufficient

¹²⁶ Catano, *Ragged Dicks*, 153.

for the abolitionist cause.¹²⁷ By this time, however, Douglass's views on how to pursue the course of abolitionism were beginning to differ significantly from those of the Garrisonians. Whereas Garrison believed that the antislavery cause should be pursued through moral suasion alone, Douglass increasingly adopted the stance that political engagement was also necessary to bring about the downfall of slavery. What Douglass essentially saw lacking in the Garrisonian strategy was a lack of performative prolepsis—a failure to anticipate the end of slavery in a manner that would practically bring about its own fulfillment and protect free blacks thereafter. As William B. Rogers notes, the basic difference between Douglass and Garrison was that the latter showed no interest in taking black reformation into “the long-range future.”¹²⁸ Considering the emphasis on self-made anticipation in his *Narrative*, Douglass's break with the Garrisonians was only a natural continuation of his masculine independence.

One of the ways that Douglass asserted his independence from his former sponsors was through a reinterpretation of the U.S. Constitution. Reflecting on his clash with the Garrisonians in his second autobiography, *My Bondage and My Freedom* (1855), Douglass writes that his departure “compelled me to re-think the whole subject [of abolitionism], and to study, with some care, not only the just and proper rules of legal interpretation, but the origin, design, nature, rights, powers, and duties of civil government, and also the relations which

¹²⁷ James McCune Smith, Introduction to *My Bondage and My Freedom* (New York: Miller, Orton & Mulligan, 1855), xxiii-xxiv.

¹²⁸ Rogers, “The Prophetic Tradition in Nineteenth Century America: William Lloyd Garrison and Frederick Douglass” (PhD diss., Drew University, 1992), 24.

human beings sustain to it.”¹²⁹ In contrast to Garrison, Douglass’s increased devotion to the nature of law led him to interpret the U.S. Constitution as inherently antislavery. Basing his interpretation within the Constitution’s intended purpose, as specified in its Preamble, Douglass argued that the institution of slavery—supported by but not explicitly mentioned in the Constitution—was a direct contradiction to the document’s promotion of liberty for all people in the U.S. This point was specifically addressed in a speech that Douglass gave on the unconstitutionality of slavery:

To suppose that one portion of this instrument sanctions Slavery, and another sanctions liberty, is to array the Constitution in conflict with itself. And this brings us to the consideration of another rule of interpretation, which is, that one part of an instrument must not be allowed to contradict another unless the language be so explicit as to make the contradiction inevitable.¹³⁰

According to David E. Schrader, because Douglass unquestionably took the Constitution to be an expression of “rational political order,” his argument for the Constitution’s antislavery nature was primarily grounded in his steadfast assertion that the Constitution could not be, as he puts it, “in conflict with itself”—to be so would make the Constitution contradictory.¹³¹ Steadfastly believing in the worldwide governance of a “natural law,” Douglass’s primary rationale for the Constitution’s being antislavery was guided by the assumption that the oppositions of slavery and liberty could not be promoted in the same document. Douglass, according to Schrader,

¹²⁹ Douglass, *My Bondage and My Freedom* (New York: Miller, Orton & Mulligan, 1855), 397.

¹³⁰ Douglass, “Slavery Unconstitutional,” *Frederick Douglass’ Paper* (February 1, 1856), in *The Life and Writings of Frederick Douglass, Volume 5 (Supplementary Volume), 1844-1860*, ed. Philip Foner (New York: International Publishers, 1975), 376.

¹³¹ Schrader, “Natural Law in the Constitutional Thought of Frederick Douglass,” in *Frederick Douglass: A Critical Reader*, eds. Bill E. Lawson and Frank M. Kirkland (Malden: Blackwell Publishers, 1999), 93.

maintained most adamantly that slavery and liberty are forms of social life in natural opposition to each other. As such, a society which attempts to maintain a commitment to principles of liberty cannot at the same time maintain a commitment to the institution of slavery. One of the two opposites must extinguish the other.¹³²

Just as he portrayed his journey to freedom as a triumph of masculine over feminine in his *Narrative*, Douglass applies a similar binary-oriented reasoning for the antislavery nature of the Constitution, arguing that the document *must* be opposed to slavery due to the assumed fact that it cannot possess two opposing motives. One must triumph over, or “extinguish,” the other.

Douglass’s argument for the Constitution’s antislavery nature not only utilizes binary oppositions but also the same performative prolepsis that structures his *Narrative*’s linear, redemptive model. By infusing the Constitution with an interpretation of its antislavery stance “in fact,” Douglass hastens the day when it will be truly antislavery “in form,” performing its prolepsis of liberation through its emancipation of all slaves in the nation. Anticipating that natural law will take care of any opposing binaries on its own, Douglass may ignore the minor incongruities in the text which indirectly contradict his interpretation of liberty. As George Lakoff and Mark Johnson point out, the truth or falsity of any conceptual framework often does not matter for the society which accepts it, since the concept will eventually be made a reality anyway by the actions of those who believe in it.¹³³ Similarly, for Douglass the truth or falsity of any current state—whether it be his feminized identity as a slave or the Constitution’s identity

¹³² Ibid., 97

¹³³ Lakoff and Johnson, *Metaphors We Live By* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1980), 3.

as proslavery—can be reversed at will by an anticipatory projection to a future, better condition.

Douglass's *Narrative*, while remaining within the conventions of the white-sponsored slave narrative and within the cultural codes of the time period, nevertheless exploits these conventions and codes for its author's singular aims. Although his autobiography is infused with a clear hierarchical binary opposition between the male and female genders that is typical for the time, Douglass lays this hierarchy as a foundation upon which to build a radical reversal of the hierarchical opposition between the black and white races, wherein a feminized black slave essentially changes his gendered identity and gains—through self-willed anticipation—a masculine independence reserved solely for white men. Douglass's *Narrative* thus subversively rejects, via its masculine theme and the structural framework that supports this theme, the cultural realities of a contemporary milieu that intended to keep the black male disempowered and ultimately emasculated, whether he was slave or free. It is a narrative that, like Douglass's proleptic journey from slavery to freedom, intends to project itself beyond the present time period to "a better day coming," where black men will achieve a self-made independence that is currently denied to them—a harsh and troubling truth that, twenty years before the publication of Douglass's *Narrative*, was made altogether too clear in the autobiography of William Grimes.

Chapter 3

DEMYTHOLOGIZATION OF THE SLAVE NARRATIVE

IN GRIMES'S *LIFE*

When William Grimes published the first edition of his autobiography in 1825, he chose to end his ambiguous, complex narrative with what is certainly one of the most controversial sentiments to ever grace the slave narrative genre:

I would advise no slave to leave his master. If he runs away, he is most sure to be taken: if he is not, he will ever be in the apprehension of it; and I do think there is no inducement for a slave to leave his master and be set free in the Northern States.¹³⁴

In this statement alone, Grimes topples many of the myths about the ex-slave's life that subsequent narratives, including Douglass's *Narrative*, would enforce by providing some bitter truths in their place: the risk of being kidnapped back into bondage, the constant anxiety the fugitive slave experiences, and the disturbing suggestion that freedom in the North is not much better than slavery in the South. "Few who followed Grimes in the fugitive slave narrative tradition," writes William Andrews, "acknowledged as frankly as he the galling irony that was supposed freedom in the North."¹³⁵ This "galling irony" permeates the entire journey charted in the *Life of William Grimes, the Runaway Slave*, becoming all the more vexing the more Grimes writes, particularly when documenting his life after slavery. Tired, anxious, and beaten down by the end of his autobiography, the first fugitive slave narrator has nothing to offer his fellow slaves but to advise them to stay put; freedom, from the little Grimes has tasted of it, can offer no reasonable "inducement" to escape.

¹³⁴ Grimes, *Life*, 102.

¹³⁵ Andrews, ed., Introduction to *Life of William Grimes*, 4.

In its candid observations and jarring hopelessness, Grimes's *Life* certainly stands apart from much of the nineteenth-century slave narratives that would follow it, particularly a traditional one like Douglass's. His autobiography depicts a journey from bondage to "freedom" where literacy does not offer liberation but is rather useless and irrelevant, where black males remain forever feminized by their color, and where there exists no hope for a better future due to the author's foreknowledge that his post-slavery life offers no stable rewards. Not just thematically but also structurally, the *Life of William Grimes* deconstructs the conventions associated with the traditional slave narrative and male autobiography in general. His autobiography stands as a telling exception to Henry Louis Gates, Jr.'s claim that slave narratives, "in their odysseys, move horizontally through space and vertically through society."¹³⁶ In Grimes's textual field, all that exists is space—open, scattered, and without vertical rise, in form or content.

In his *Narrative* Douglass briefly addresses the anxieties of post-slavery life in his *Narrative*, but, unlike Grimes, this anxiety is momentary and dispelled almost the moment it is mentioned. After escaping from slavery, Douglass cites his arrival in New York as "a moment of the highest excitement I ever experienced," soon followed by "a feeling of great insecurity and loneliness." In a passage that Grimes could undoubtedly relate to, Douglass attributes his sudden feelings of alienation and distrust to an overwhelming fear of being returned to slavery:

¹³⁶ Gates, *Figures in Black*, 82.

There I was in the midst of thousands, and yet a perfect stranger; without home and without friends, in the midst of thousands of my own brethren—children of a common Father, and yet I dared not unfold to any one my sad condition. I was afraid to speak to any one for fear of speaking to the wrong one, and thereby falling into the hands of money-loving kidnappers, whose business it was to lie in wait for the panting fugitive, as the ferocious beasts of the forest lie in wait for their prey. [...] I saw in every white man an enemy, and in almost every colored man cause for distrust.¹³⁷

At this fleeting instant, Douglass threatens to topple the dualistic hell-to-heaven framework that his autobiography otherwise perpetuates. For a moment Douglass seems in agreement with Grimes's notion that freedom is not secure at all but a place that is "embittered, indeed, with constant apprehension."¹³⁸ Not only does Douglass convey the uneasy sensation of being a stranger in a strange land, but he also suggests the possibility of being captured and returned to slavery itself—a risky admission, considering the implicit requirement of most antebellum slave narratives to portray the North as a place of refuge, if not salvation.

However, Douglass writes of his anxiety being quickly resolved. Whatever fears Douglass might have experienced upon reaching the North, they are presented in his *Narrative* as not much more than a momentary hindrance, vanishing almost instantly once Douglass receives his much-anticipated rewards of freedom. "Thank Heaven," he writes, reinforcing the divine design of his journey, "I remained but a short time in this distressed situation."¹³⁹ For the final five pages of his autobiography, Douglass proceeds to describe his various accomplishments, many of them fulfilling the masculine role that had been long

¹³⁷ Douglass, *Narrative*, 75.

¹³⁸ Grimes, *Life*, 29.

¹³⁹ Douglass, *Narrative*, 75.

suppressed in slavery: marrying Anna, adopting the name *Douglass*, working diligently to support his wife, and, finally, representing himself as an orator for the abolitionist cause.¹⁴⁰ Never returning to that momentary anxious state which depicted the North as a forest of “ferocious beasts,” the final section of the *Narrative* instead presents the North as an opportune ground for Douglass to reach his projected goal of becoming a self-made man. Although he modestly leaves “those acquainted with my labors” to judge his success, there is no doubt that in these final passages of his autobiography Douglass’s performative prolepsis is finally fulfilling itself.

The absence of such fulfillment in Grimes’s *Life*, by contrast, deters the kind of anticipatory hope utilized in Douglass’s *Narrative* to characterize the North as a place of divine providence. Indeed, spiritual metaphors of any type are rare in Grimes’s autobiography; keeping his autobiography firmly rooted in the secular, Grimes displays a “singular refusal to attribute his adversity and pain in both slavery and freedom to a divine design to reinforce his faith.”¹⁴¹ Although Grimes occasionally prays to God and even experiences what could be described as nothing less than a religious conversion¹⁴², these incidents, like most every incident in the narrative, are isolated from any purposeful Judeo-Christian framework. Other references to God and biblical passages are just as apt to be blasphemous outbursts from Grimes’s masters¹⁴³ or directly associated with the afflictions of slavery, such as the use of “Moses’ law”—a punishment of

¹⁴⁰ Ibid., 75-80.

¹⁴¹ Andrews, ed., Introduction to *Life of William Grimes*, 9.

¹⁴² Grimes, *Life*, 57.

¹⁴³ Ibid., 54, 77.

39 lashes, as dictated in Deuteronomy 25:2-3—to keep slaves in line.¹⁴⁴ Unlike Douglass, who devotes an entire epilogue at the end of his *Narrative* to assure readers that his occasional condemnation of Christianity is strictly related to the “*slaveholding religion* of this land,”¹⁴⁵ Grimes makes no distinction between the religion of his masters and his own. The closest he comes to perpetuating this contrast is when, after being told by a master that he “shall die and be damned,” Grimes implies that his master may be the one to receive this “blessing” in the afterlife. Even in this instance, however, Grimes withholds final judgment with the admission, “I will not say.”¹⁴⁶ If Grimes is compelled to keep his religious beliefs a “profound secret” from his masters¹⁴⁷, he is just as apt to keep them from his readers. When Grimes does hear a “voice from heaven,” he does “not conceive it necessary” to describe its contents, despite offering plenty of descriptions of more “superstitious” supernatural elements elsewhere.¹⁴⁸ Reflecting the momentary, stream-of-consciousness nature of his narrative itself, Grimes prefers to keep his thoughts directly in the present rather than extend them toward a future heavenly reward.

Some of Grimes’s more allusive biblical references suggest that slavery, if not also the ex-slave’s life thereafter, is unable to coexist with any kind of spiritual hope. In a strange reference to Christ’s invocation to “go and sin no more,”¹⁴⁹ Grimes is at one point told by a master to “go, behave yourself well and you shall

¹⁴⁴ Ibid., 54, 78.

¹⁴⁵ Douglass, *Narrative*, 81.

¹⁴⁶ Grimes, *Life*, 55-56.

¹⁴⁷ Ibid., 75.

¹⁴⁸ Ibid., 66.

¹⁴⁹ John 8:11.

not be whipped.”¹⁵⁰ The fact that Grimes is still whipped after this faux-promise demonstrates how slavery perverts the redemptive impulse. Inverting Christ’s metaphor in Matthew 11:30, Grimes defines slavery as “that yoke which is *not* easy, *nor* the burden light.”¹⁵¹ Grimes’s biblical invocation might be construed as an argument that reads slavery as a negation of Christianity—an argument with which Douglass would readily agree—but given that Grimes’s autobiography offers no clear opposition between slaveholding religion and any that is unassociated with slavery, his remark suggests a negation of spiritual hope in itself. Immediately following his description of slavery as a “yoke of bondage,” Grimes pessimistically adds that “to repine is useless” and that slaves must therefore “submit to our fate, and bear up as well as we can, under the cruel treatment of our despotic tyrants.”¹⁵² In contrast to the self-fulfilling, redemptive function of performative prolepsis that Douglass uses to reach his desired freedom, the only action Grimes can offer is to persistently endure, as best as one can, life’s inevitable “cruel treatment.”

Granted, Grimes’s autobiography is not without some references to anticipation. “If it were not for our hopes,” he writes, “our hearts would break; we poor slaves always cherish hopes of better times.”¹⁵³ This hope manifests itself when, early on in his *Life*, Grimes reveals his decision to run away from slavery.¹⁵⁴ Although he does not utilize this resolution to provide a continuous, dramatic structure à la Douglass’s *Narrative*, it at least provides an implicit

¹⁵⁰ Grimes, *Life*, 45.

¹⁵¹ *Ibid.*, 58, my emphasis.

¹⁵² *Ibid.*, 58.

¹⁵³ *Ibid.*, 39.

¹⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, 37.

anticipatory rationale for his eventual escape. Grimes even shows some awareness of the self-fulfilling nature of performative prolepsis when, after being advised by a free black man to escape from slavery, he tells the man that he “would not run away unless I was sure of gaining my freedom by it.”¹⁵⁵ This awareness is again demonstrated at the close of his *Life*, even though he remains generally reluctant to encourage others to escape. “Those slaves who have kind masters are, perhaps, as happy as the generality of mankind,” he argues, then adding, “They are not aware that their condition can be better, and I don’t know as it can: indeed it cannot, except by their own exertions.”¹⁵⁶ Although Grimes advocates that ignorance is bliss for the slaves who have “kind” masters, he still alludes to the power of self-willed anticipation—i.e., the slaves’ “own exertions”—to project themselves to a better condition.

In reference to this exertion’s culmination in future success, however, Grimes has little to offer. Whereas Douglass ends his *Narrative* with his anticipated hope fulfilled in the beginnings of Northern success, Grimes ends by writing, “I am now entirely destitute of property; where and how I shall live I don’t know; where and how I shall die I don’t know; but I hope to be prepared.”¹⁵⁷

Grimes’s reference to “hope” here is not an empowering means of anticipation but simply an attempt to stay positive in the midst of a situation that, based on the doubtful words that precede it, remains very dire. If Grimes is an optimist, he is certainly an illogical one, considering the misfortune he has experienced for the majority of his life and is likely to experience further. Unlike Douglass, who

¹⁵⁵ Ibid., 50.

¹⁵⁶ Ibid., 101.

¹⁵⁷ Ibid., 103.

can retrospectively write of the power of performative prolepsis due to the validity of his present comforts, Grimes has no such stable context from which to situate any hope. Indeed, Grimes can barely distinguish his current life as a “free” man from his time as a slave, since both present hardships of their own.

It should come as no surprise that Grimes makes no effort to conceal the implicit connection between the market success of his autobiography and his own economic stability, given his failure to thrive in the marketplace. Grimes’s *Life* explicitly illustrates the uneasy connection between the capitalism of slavery and that of the slave narrative, as emphasized in Ross J. Pudaloff’s ironic suggestion of how an ex-slave, “metamorphosed into a commodity when he was enslaved,” subsequently “transforms his life back into another commodity, his autobiography, to demonstrate his freedom.”¹⁵⁸ Unlike Douglass, who occasionally foreshadows his role as an author in his *Narrative* but never alludes to the capitalistic aspects of his autobiography, Grimes practically flaunts his narrative’s integrally financial purpose. In the very first line of his *Life*, Grimes asks acquainted readers to “purchase his history” and proceeds to offer a number of reasons “why they should purchase it.”¹⁵⁹ One of the primary reasons Grimes cites is the poverty-ridden circumstances he has found himself in since the occasion of another purchase: his own. After living well in Connecticut for six years, Grimes mentions that he was “compelled to purchase his freedom with the sacrifice of all he had earned,” leaving him “stripped” of his earnings and “turned

¹⁵⁸ Pudaloff, “No Change Without Purchase: Olaudah Equiano and the Economies of Self and Market,” *Early American Literature* 40, no. 3 (2005): 520.

¹⁵⁹ Grimes, *Life*, 29.

penniless upon the world with a family.”¹⁶⁰ Whereas Douglass purchased his freedom with the financial contributions of friends in England, Grimes purchased his out of his own pocket—a sacrifice indeed that left him irrevocably damaged, financially, and delimited his patriarchal role as husband and father.

Grimes’s direct correlation between purchasing his freedom and falling into poverty conflicts with the traditional depiction of the slave’s self-purchase as a positive, redemptive event in the slave narrative genre. Harkening all the way back to Olaudah Equiano’s 1789 *Interesting Narrative*, the self-purchase has typically signified the dividing line between the slave’s time in slavery and time afterward, structuring the slave’s life into two distinct—and dualistically opposed—phases. Ross J. Pudaloff, in his analysis of the *Interesting Narrative*, argues that in the case of Equiano’s autobiography, this final transaction makes the slave’s very commodification a positive element. Despite the degrading nature of his condition, asserts Pudaloff, Equiano’s identity as commodity finally allows him to purchase his self and thus achieve freedom; within the very system that causes his oppression, Equiano finds “an overwhelming logic that, even as it risks slavery, ultimately justifies freedom.”¹⁶¹ Although Douglass never goes as far as to claim value in the inherently capitalistic nature of slavery, his own purchase of freedom nevertheless clears the path for further capitalistic ventures, protecting Douglass from the threat of slave catchers so that he may live securely—and successfully—in the U.S. as a writer and orator. For Equiano, Douglass, and most other antebellum slave narrators, self-purchase is at worst a

¹⁶⁰ Ibid.

¹⁶¹ Pudaloff, “No Change Without Purchase,” 518.

necessary transaction and at best a final act of liberation for the slave, opening the door to future economic success and masculine self-making.

For Grimes, by contrast, self-purchase constitutes not a chance at success but rather the deprivation of residence, the promise of future hardships, and the consequential wounding of his masculinity. Upon encountering an emissary of his last master while living in Litchfield, Grimes is forced to give up his home—that cornerstone of patriarchal stability—in order to secure his freedom.¹⁶² By the end of the first edition of his autobiography, Grimes indicates that he is still homeless, not knowing where he will live or die.¹⁶³ Although Grimes mentions that he made his sacrificial self-purchase so that his family would not be without a husband and father, the transaction’s devastating blow to Grimes’s patriarchal identity is clearly foregrounded in the empathetic gesture that closes his autobiography’s opening statement:

Let any one suppose himself a husband and father, possessed of a house, home, and livelihood: a stranger enters that house; before his children, and in fair daylight, puts the chain on his leg, where it remains till the last cent of his property buys from avarice and cruelty, the remnant of a life, whose best years had been spent in misery!¹⁶⁴

This passage’s inducement to the reader to “suppose himself a husband and father” gives the impression that, like Douglass’s *Narrative*, Grimes’s *Life* is also driven by a masculine impulse. However, as his opening statement demonstrates, Grimes’s autobiography portrays not the male ex-slave’s achievement of masculinity but his loss of it—or, more precisely, his inability to

¹⁶² Grimes, *Life*, 100-101.

¹⁶³ *Ibid.*, 103.

¹⁶⁴ *Ibid.*, 29.

achieve masculinity at all in an “emancipated” state. Slavery remains for Grimes a “chain on his leg”; even after he escapes, he remains defined by racist legal sanctions that designate him as self-stolen property, thereby requiring him to purchase his own commodified body so that he may live “freely.”

Grimes’s devastation upon the purchase of his body reconfigures the slave’s self-purchase as less of an escape from slavery than a continuation of the system’s oppression, working beyond the geographical barrier between North and South to sustain an oppressive milieu for the ex-slave’s remaining life. The very transaction, after all, maintains the slave’s status as property to be bought rather than human beings who, like members of white society, are naturally free. By purchasing one’s self the slave legally confirms, in capitalistic and linguistic terms, the validity of the master’s legal ownership, even though the slave in all other respects uses these terms to escape from the master’s ownership. The contradictory nature of this final transaction, despite being celebrated by slaves like Equiano, ultimately forms a troubling sense of social identity for the ex-slave, with freedom remaining forever the effect of a transaction that, in language, implicitly affirms his or her status as property.

As Grimes’s *Life* demonstrates, the self-purchase’s disturbing capitalistic signification leads to further capitalistic troubles—not to mention a diluted masculinity—in life after slavery. The purchase of his freedom, after all, cheapens Grimes’s freedom, along with the consequential masculine independence this freedom is supposed to bring, by the very fact that, by law, it must be *purchased*, making his “free” state simply a legalized negation of his

former state. Due to his status as an ex-slave, Grimes faces a future that is essentially “defined only by what it was not.”¹⁶⁵ This symbolized negation is highly problematic for a male slave like Grimes, since it leaves him naturally associated with his original devalued status, even as he attempts to live independently after slavery. When speaking of the self-made man, even Douglass admits that it is “hard to shake off all the effects of early surroundings.”¹⁶⁶ In relation to Grimes’s experience, however, this seems like an understatement: his being an ex-slave, which has been defined by his self-purchase, keeps him legally if not also culturally shackled in white society by his relation to his “early surroundings” of feminized objectification. By consequence, Grimes’s negative status makes it increasingly difficult, if not impossible, for him to achieve “naturalized” manhood. In the gender-decisive eyes of the dominant culture, the purchase of freedom represents what might be defined as a reverse castration: freedom is nothing but the putting on of a masculine phallus which has not originated by birth but is rather legally granted to the slave through slavery’s capitalistic rights of purchase. In the context of his initial cultural status as a commodity, a male ex-slave like Grimes can never completely naturalize the gendered requirements of masculinity but only adopt them as cultural signifiers.

Just as the manhood promised in the American model of self-made independence cannot be achieved by Grimes, his narrative itself exhibits a formless structural nature that deconstructs the masculine traits typically employed as metaphors in the traditional slave narrative. This is particularly the

¹⁶⁵ Walter Johnson, *Soul by Soul: Life Inside the Antebellum Slave Market* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1999), 220.

¹⁶⁶ Douglass, “The Trials and Triumphs of Self-Made Men,” 299.

case in the genre's reliance on the geographical hierarchy of Southern slavery versus Northern freedom, integral to the structure of most narratives. Grimes's *Life*, however, deconstructs the North/South opposition not only in his impoverished accounts of Northern living but also in the structural decision to expand his narrative beyond the point of his escape, which is where most slave narratives end, aside from the occasional documentation of a few "high points" in the ex-slave's career.¹⁶⁷ By refusing to end his narrative after his escape from slavery so that he may testify to his troubled life in the so-called "free states," Grimes's narrative structurally challenges the genre's reliance on the binary opposition between North and South as well as the spiritual, masculine framework this geographical division harbors. His *Life* exposes this framework for what it is: a metaphorical structure, guided by a redemptive, masculinized framework—sometimes actualized, as in Douglass's case, while most other times imposed by genre conventions—that does not adhere to his own experience, nor to the experience of most ex-slaves.

This is not to say Grimes's *Life* is without an expressive, metaphorical structure of its own. Although it does not exhibit the framework typically employed in the classic slave narrative, Grimes's narrative depicts a structural fusion of the physical and abstract that signifies what may be awkwardly classified as a "metaphorless metaphor"—a structure that, in its structurelessness, suggests the ultimate inability to express slavery in anything other than phenomenological terms. This synthesis of the physical and abstract

¹⁶⁷ Andrews, ed., Introduction to *Life of William Grimes*, 23.

is implied at an early point in Grimes's *Life* as he hides from masters during an unsuccessful escape attempt:

While in the log I fell asleep, and dreamed they had caught and was tying me to be whipped; and such was my agony that I awoke, from a dream, indeed, but to reality not less painful.¹⁶⁸

In this brief but telling statement, Grimes emphasizes the underlying connection between nightmare and reality for the slave, thereby asserting the inability of any figurative, abstract language to properly convey the slave's experience. As he suggests, even Grimes's worst dreams are inseparable from his actualized oppression, which helps to explain the free-associative nature of his autobiography's narrative structure. Grime's *Life* may not exhibit the dualistic spiritual framework of hell-to-heaven that is integral to many nineteenth-century slave narratives, but its stream-of-consciousness structural pattern serves as an appropriate evocation of Grimes's actualized experience.

For all its structural looseness and seeming absence of a purposeful framework, Grimes's narrative nevertheless utilizes these sans-metaphorical patterns to evoke the complex structure of his own history. In Douglass's *Narrative*, the anticipatory qualities of prolepsis fused form and content together to exemplify the author's successful flight to freedom within the structure of the narrative. However, in Grimes's case this fusion is one that symbolizes not the hope of future success but rather the inescapability of the past—a past that, like the permanent wounds of slavery, remains with the ex-slave his entire life and in fact contributes to his inability to move forward to the supposed “salvation” of freedom in the North. The manner in which Grimes's experience contrasts with

¹⁶⁸ Grimes, *Life*, 38.

Douglass's provides the basis for a different form of expression, revealing how metaphorical concepts like anticipatory hope and spiritual redemption, so important to Douglass's *Narrative*, can "keep us from focusing on other aspects of the concept that are inconsistent with that metaphor."¹⁶⁹ By deconstructing the structural framework of the narratives that would follow it, Grimes's *Life* reveals how the dualistic, binary-ridden metaphors inherent in the traditional slave narrative are ultimately inconsistent with his own memory of slavery—a memory that, like a permanent wound, cannot simply be "redeemed" but in fact remains with him for his entire life.

Throughout his autobiography, Grimes makes numerous references to the wounds he receives, not merely to convey the brutal nature of slavery but also to suggest the irrevocability of the slave's experience, even in freedom. Grimes's *Life*, for all its lack of literary finesse, is a remarkably sensual document that works to fuse Grimes's memories with an acute sensation of the sights and physical markers of his past. His description of the "cracking" of lice in a prison cell or the wetness of the clothes belonging to a witch named Frankee infest Grimes's autobiography with a living, breathing connection between Grimes's experience in the past and its lasting effects on him in the present. This conflation between past and present is especially evident in Grimes's depictions of his wounds in slavery. After being severely whipped by Master George, Grimes writes, "I carry the stripes to this day," locating in slavery's physical wounds a permanence that extends beyond slavery itself.¹⁷⁰ The remark recalls

¹⁶⁹ Lakoff and Johnson, *Metaphors We Live By*, 10, 20.

¹⁷⁰ Grimes, *Life*, 44.

Douglass's reference to the gashes in his feet—a physical aftereffect of slavery that remains a permanent reminder of Douglass's past, despite the independence he has achieved in freedom. For Grimes, however, this permanence is just as much psychological as physical, which he emphasizes following an earlier whipping: "It seems as though I should not forget this flogging when I die; it grieved my soul beyond the power of time to cure."¹⁷¹ Rejecting Lakoff and Johnson's presumption in *Metaphors We Live By* that emotional concepts are "not clearly delineated in our experience in any direct fashion and therefore must be comprehended primarily indirectly,"¹⁷² Grimes locates in the wound a *living* metaphor, one that fuses the physical effects of slavery with psychological grief, incurable and everlasting. Unlike Douglass's gashes, which are ironically conflated with Douglass's own writing utensil—"the pen with which I am writing"¹⁷³—in order to imply his eventual independence, Grimes's wounds harbor no such self-empowering relation. Conflating the concrete (physical) with the abstract (psychological), the Grimes's wounds work against the time-oriented metaphor of the spiritual, anticipatory framework found in narratives like Douglass's and instead persist beyond the period of slavery as both a psychological memory and a corporeal stigma.

One of Grimes's most evocative references to wounds, and their enduring physiological/psychological effects, occurs midway through his *Life* when, while serving jail time as a slave, he takes pity on a fellow slave named Reuben, whose whip marks he describes with startling imagery:

¹⁷¹ Ibid., 41.

¹⁷² Lakoff and Johnson, *Metaphors We Live By*, 85.

¹⁷³ Douglass, *Narrative*, 28.

This poor man's back was cut up with the lash, until I could compare it to nothing but a field lately ploughed. He was whipped three times in one week, forty stripes, save one, and well put on by this athletic fellow. You may well think this poor negro's back was not only well lacerated, but brutally and inhumanly bruised.¹⁷⁴

Grimes's remarks depict slavery's enduring mark on the body of Reuben, whose back, being "well lacerated" as well as "brutally and inhumanly bruised," signifies the permanent wound of slavery that will remain with him whether or not he ever manages to escape. This is a back so mutilated that Grimes, in recalling the incident, metaphorically compares it to "nothing but a field lately ploughed"—an all-too-painfully relevant comparison that explicitly references the location where slaves, plowing fields for their brutal and inhumane masters, receive their lashes.

By relocating Reuben's wound to the field of oppression that is its probable origin, Grimes's metaphor suggests slavery's vicious cycle, where the physical signs of bondage perpetually revert back to the environment of their occurrence. Unlike Douglass's metaphorical utilization of performative prolepsis, where his anticipation for freedom is initiated in the logical inducement provided by his exposure to literacy, Grimes's metaphor situates slavery as an irrecoverable entity, remaining with the slave and ex-slave alike as a physical, if not also psychological, wound. Even after escape, the physicalized evidence of the wound's mark perpetually recalls its owner's time in slavery, underscoring the manner in which slavery remains "lately ploughed" for the former slave—a slave who, although technically "free," still remains close to his past oppression. The wound, like Grimes's written narrative, functions as a mark that, although signifying the past, remains visible in the present; it indicates a fusion of the past

¹⁷⁴ Grimes, *Life*, 65-66.

and present where, as Paul Ricœur writes, “[t]he passage no longer is but the trace remains.”¹⁷⁵ As Grimes’s *Life* illustrates, those who ran away from slavery still carried its enduring mark, not merely physically but also in the enduring psychological and emotional wounds that persist even after escape.

The slave’s wounds, in effect, serve as living signifiers that, through their engraved markings, present the struggles of his life’s narrative on his own body, thereby making unnecessary any of the conventional, dualistic metaphors typically utilized in the slave narrative genre. Grimes’s relocation of Reuben’s wounds serve as a “metaphorless metaphor” in its implicit inability to compare the experience of slavery to anything but itself. His wounds, in other words, function simultaneously as abstract signifier *and* physicalized signified: whatever conceptual metaphors Grimes might use to convey the slave’s emotional pain are inherently fused with the bodily markers that are this pain physicalized. To convey the fragmented experience of the ex-slave—as criss-crossed and scattered as Reuben’s scarred back—within the dualistic, polished structure of “white”-washed male autobiography is to risk simplifying, if not also betraying, this experience. On the contrary, just as Grimes can compare Reuben’s whipped back to “nothing but a field lately ploughed,” the everlastingly wounded life of a slave can be compared to nothing less than the field of slavery itself in which this life was effectively ploughed with pain and suffering.

Grimes’s *Life* exemplifies Lindon Barrett’s assertion that African American autobiographies present narratives that are basically “unimaginable” for white

¹⁷⁵ Ricœur, *Time and Narrative*, vol. 3, trans. Kathleen Blamey and David Pellauer (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1988), 119.

readers.¹⁷⁶ Those who have never experienced slavery, not to mention any form of racist persecution, cannot even begin to comprehend its reality, no matter how sympathetic they may be. This makes it problematic for slave narrators, wishing to depict their suffering, to adopt an autobiographical framework that is ridden with simplistic oppositions and modeled by white men—from St. Augustine’s spiritual confessions to Benjamin Franklin’s self-made odyssey—whose lives were in no manner similar to the slaves’ history of constant objectification. Unlike Douglass, who fuses the proleptic nature of the narrative form with his own prolepsis towards freedom, Grimes cannot adhere to this metaphorical structure for the very reason that his life does not reflect it. Grimes’s *Life* displays the inadequacy of masculine spiritual structuring metaphors to depict the life of a former slave; like the wound’s relation to a “field lately ploughed,” the wounded life of a slave cannot metaphorically be expressed in anything else but the slave’s life itself.

In this sense, Grimes’s *Life* begins to show an expressive power of its own, separate from the white editors that typically impose their structuring “polish” over the slave narrator’s history. As Grimes indicates, his wounds cannot be polished or purified anyway, since they remain with him after slavery; indeed, their criss-crossing nature affects Grimes’s own narrative, breaking down traditional dichotomies related to North/South, slavery/freedom, masculine/feminine and thereby exposing the failure of such white-imposed metaphors to govern the actual life of the ex-slave. His autobiography asserts

¹⁷⁶ Lindon Barrett, “Self-Knowledge, Law, and African American Autobiography: Lucy A. Delaney’s ‘From the Darkness Cometh the Light’,” in *The Culture of Autobiography*, ed. Robert Folkenflik (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1993), 106.

Roger Rosenblatt's assumption that "[n]o black American author has ever felt the need to invent a nightmare to make his point."¹⁷⁷ As Grimes repeatedly demonstrates, the black American's life—particularly those who lived in slavery—is usually nightmarish enough, requiring no invented metaphorical apparatus to convey its horrors.

Just as the structure of Grimes's *Life* exhibits an absence of metaphorical binaries utilized in traditional slave narratives, his critique of slavery likewise does not use oppositions, as Douglass's does, but rather attacks the governmental system that perpetuates these oppositions. Throughout his autobiography Grimes remains conscious of the problematic legal implications of his self-purchase, even going so far as to fault the U.S. government rather than his masters for forcing him into the transaction. For all the anger and grief he feels over the effects of having to purchase his own freedom, Grimes surprisingly offers gratitude to his master for freeing him and concedes that he "was undoubtedly the lawful property of my master, according to the laws of the country."¹⁷⁸ It cannot be clearly determined whether Grimes intends to be sarcastic or not in his admission that he is "lawful property," although his other references to the U.S. government imply that this may well be his intention. "I was born in the year 1784, in J-----, County of King George, Virginia," Grimes says of his slave origins, "in a land boasting its freedom, and under a government whose motto is Liberty and Equality."¹⁷⁹ Ironically referencing America's

¹⁷⁷ Rosenblatt, "Black Autobiography," in *The Man in the Water: Essays and Stories* (New York: Random House, 1994), 61.

¹⁷⁸ Grimes, *Life*, 101.

¹⁷⁹ *Ibid.*, 30.

“freedom” and values of “Liberty and Equality,” Grimes centers his protest right from the start not on slaveholders but on an unjust government that grants men the right to victimize others. “I was in law, a bastard and slave,” he concedes at the start of his autobiography¹⁸⁰; in Grimes’s eyes, it is the law, not his masters’ authority, that is ultimately to blame for his degraded status.

Another explanation for Grimes’s contempt can be attributed to the constant abuse he experienced from the American legal system throughout his life after slavery. After being falsely accused of attacking a local woman, Grimes is imprisoned and, unable to post bail, must remain there for three months. At trial he is acquitted due to insufficient evidence.¹⁸¹ While living in Litchfield, Grimes is again accused—this time for unwittingly hiring a “girl of bad character” as a housemaid—and loses five hundred dollars in the resulting trial, in addition to injuring his “character.”¹⁸² Even in cases he won, Grimes notes that his “lawyers would alone reap the benefit of it.”¹⁸³ Summarizing these unjust incidents, Grimes writes, “It has been my fortune most always to be suspected by the good, and to be cheated and abused by the vicious.”¹⁸⁴ Dispelling the distinction between the “good” and “vicious,” Grimes finds one end of the dualistic moral spectrum to be not much better than the other. Moral codes seem to have little use for Grimes; reflecting on his numerous legal scuffles with his neighbors, he notes that “those to whom I have done kindness, have often

¹⁸⁰ Ibid.

¹⁸¹ Ibid., 88-90.

¹⁸² Ibid., 91-93.

¹⁸³ Ibid., 91.

¹⁸⁴ Ibid., 93.

proved ungrateful.”¹⁸⁵ Grimes’s steady distrust in the laws of the land permeates his entire *Life*, beginning with their condemnation of him in slavery to the way others legally abuse him thereafter.

In the North Grimes finds a systematic type of oppression, guided more by society than individuals, which works to keep former slaves like him perpetually in a state of poverty. “Let it not be imagined that the poor and friendless are entirely free from oppression where slavery does not exist,” writes Grimes, addressing the sectional binary between North and South years before the slave narrative genre grounded this deceptive partition.¹⁸⁶ The reason for his prescient deconstruction is attributed perhaps less to Grimes’s race than the oppressive class system in America. Grimes’s *Life*, asserts William Andrews, provides a “canny diagnosis of the North as a place where class, even more than color, determines a person’s fate.”¹⁸⁷ For the most part Grimes downplays race when considering his poverty-stricken circumstances in the North, identifying a kind of slavery there that depends less on racist ideology than upper-class exploitation of the poor.

Grimes’s class-conscious critique is particularly apparent in his observations of how the poor are driven out of towns for no other reason than because of the suspicion attributed to their economic status. “It is very mean and cruel to drive a man out of town because he is suspected of some crime or breach of law,” Grimes writes, citing his recurring contempt of the American legal system. “If he is guilty, punish him, but [do] not set him adrift on suspicion, or

¹⁸⁵ Ibid., 95.

¹⁸⁶ Ibid., 91.

¹⁸⁷ Andrews, ed., Introduction to *Life of William Grimes*, 25.

from mere tyranny, because his poverty exposes him to it.”¹⁸⁸ A few passages later, Grimes addresses this issue in more detail, beginning with how driving the poor out of town keeps earnest-minded entrepreneurs like himself from ever establishing a stable business:

The practice of warning poor people out of town is very cruel. It may be necessary that towns should have that power, otherwise some might be overrun with paupers. But it is mighty apt to be abused. A poor man just gets agoing in business, and is then warned to depart; perhaps he has a family, and don't know where to go, or what to do.

Grimes then, acting as a personal eyewitness, shifts his critique to local religious communities, exposing their hypocrisy in the way they profess charity and yet neglect Grimes himself:

I am a poor man, and ignorant; but I am a man of sense. I have seen them contributing at church for the heathen, to build churches, and send preachers to them, yet there was no place where I could get a seat in the church. I knew in New Haven indians and negroes, come from a great many thousand miles, set to be educated, while there were people I knew in the town cold and hungry, and ignorant. They have kind of societies to make clothes for those who, they say, go naked in their own countries. The ladies sometimes do this at one end of a town, while their fathers, who may happen to be selectmen, may be warning a poor man and his family out at the other end, for fear they may have to be buried at the town expense. It sounds rather strange upon a man's ear who feels that he is friendless and abused in society, to hear so many speeches about charity; for I was always inclined to be observing.¹⁸⁹

Tellingly, Grimes does not identify any specific persons in his extended critique of the church but instead blames the community at large. This passage in his *Life* exemplifies Grimes's uniquely discerning view of injustice in the U.S., one concentrated on its societal norms—from the hypocrisy of religious communities

¹⁸⁸ Grimes, *Life*, 100.

¹⁸⁹ *Ibid.*, 102.

to that of the government itself—rather than individuals, who in Grimes’s eyes are all partakers of a corrupt system.

Grimes’s criticism of the governmental system is so explicit that, at the close of the first edition of his autobiography, he attacks the U.S. Constitution. Utilizing some of the most startling imagery in the slave narrative genre, Grimes closes his *Life* with a passage that displays simultaneous hesitation and ferocity:

If it were not for the stripes on my back which were made while I was a slave, I would in my will leave my skin as a legacy to the government, desiring that it might be taken off and made into parchment, and then bind the constitution of glorious, happy and *free* America. Let the skin of an American slave bind the charter of American liberty!¹⁹⁰

Whereas Douglass interprets the Constitution within the ethos of his performative prolepsis, Grimes’s deconstructive suggestion—to bind the Constitution in the body of the slave itself—goes further in evoking the underlying connection between the oppressed slave and the American government, thereby forging the typical binary opposition between slave and master in favor of a more deeply ingrained critique of the laws which sanction this dehumanizing relationship. At the start of his proclamation Grimes displays a certain hesitancy in allowing his skin to fuse with the Constitution due to his “stripes,” as if he is aware of the ramifications of his cultural marker—the literal and symbolic wounds that remain in opposition to the principles espoused in the Constitution and that, like “the field lately ploughed,” serve as a damning reminder to others of Grimes’s past in slavery through his wounds’ perpetual relocation to this time. Yet immediately after acknowledging his wounds, Grimes suddenly changes his mind, as if he is

¹⁹⁰ Ibid., 103.

disregarding the white cultural codes that in turn disregard the black ex-slave. Turning the tables on his oppressors, Grimes calls for the law-governing document of his nation to be bound in the blemished skin of the very people that it oppresses, no matter how abused and beaten this skin may be. On the contrary, this skin's wounded nature, rather than being a hindrance to its owner, has the power to expose the hypocrisy that Grimes implies is inherent in "glorious, happy and *free* America."

It's appropriate that Grimes should end the first edition of his autobiography with the imagery of slaves fusing their skin with the U.S. Constitution, since it evokes the similar manner in which Grimes himself, against all odds, fuses his personal history—the historical "skin" of his *Life*—with the public discourse of the American autobiography, despite the fact that this history remains too permanently wounded with failure and pain to fit into the kind of spiritual, hell-to-heaven framework adopted by more successful slave narrators. Because the wound of slavery merely relocates to its own "field lately ploughed," Grimes's wounded text may not be able to fully convey the actual experience of slavery; arguably no form of literary expression could. But in its literary isolation from white intervention and from the white-imposed metaphors that accompany this intervention, Grimes's *Life* possesses an unparalleled ability through its wounded aesthetic to deconstruct *avant la lettre* the metaphorical structures of his more famous successors as well as the surrounding societal norms that make such structures a necessity. Rejecting such frameworks, Grimes infuses his *Life* with the scattered, random nature of his life itself: the so-called imperfections that

would certainly keep Grimes from entering the abolitionist movement, if not also a role model for the black literary consciousness, but that nevertheless have potential to deconstruct the masculine, capitalistic, white-imposed criteria which enforce these very restrictions. As the next chapter demonstrates, Grimes's *Life* lives up to its deconstructive potential in numerous instances, particularly in exposing the deceptive traits of self-made masculinity.

Chapter 4

GRIMES'S DECONSTRUCTION OF MASCULINE AUTHORITY

As illustrated in the last chapter, Grimes's *Life* functions as a kind of wound, both in its thematic content and its formal structure. Thematically, his autobiography is one where pain remains and the future is uncertain; aesthetically, his autobiography is scattered and unstructured, reflecting Grimes's broken, beaten history. However, it is not merely Grimes's history that remains wounded, but also his psychological sense of identity. "I will split your damned brains out," threatens a master at one point in Grimes's autobiography¹⁹¹—a threat that matters little, since Grimes's autobiography itself reads like the scattered, wounded nature of his own psyche, his mental consciousness split open, if not also split apart, for all to witness. "To open Grimes's book," writes William Andrews, "is to open the wounds of the ex-slave's body and mind, for the book is the man's psychic body manifested in language."¹⁹² His identity being inseparable from the linguistic structure of his narrative, Grimes's "psychic body" is not merely present in the aesthetic of his autobiography but also in his ambiguous social status as an ex-slave. Both remain complexly situated between the binaries of slavery/freedom, black/white, and feminine/masculine; neither allows the guiding metaphors which more successful ex-slaves like Douglass utilized, first in their narratives and subsequently in their lives, to achieve their masculinized goals.

¹⁹¹ Grimes, *Life*, 56.

¹⁹² Andrews, *To Tell a Free Story*, 79.

In slavery and in freedom, Grimes finds his identity scattered, like his narrative, into a series of fragments, always changing and never permanent. Part of the complexity of Grimes's identity is attributed to his time in slavery, where his degraded status as a commodity gave him not only "ten different masters" but also, according to the custom of slave ownership, "three different names."¹⁹³ The complex nature of the slave's identity is even admitted by Douglass, albeit long after the publication of his *Narrative*, when he claims that the self-made man, before reaching his place of achievement, abounds in "oddities, confusions, opposites, and discords"—traits that undoubtedly refer to Douglass's past in slavery.¹⁹⁴ The ex-slave, no matter how successful his life after slavery, must inevitably grapple with a persona split into varying pieces, sometimes controlled by the self and sometimes controlled by others.

Although he did not have to grapple with the same struggles Grimes met after escaping from slavery, Douglass undoubtedly understood some of the disassociating effects that slavery can have on identity. Indeed, as different as their lives were, Douglass and Grimes shared one particularly identifiable trait: they were both mulattos. Carrying black and white in their blood, Douglass and Grimes both had to deal with others' perceptions regarding the social taboo of their racial makeup, not to mention the effects of this taboo on their own perceptions. The general racial attitude during the antebellum era, according to Foster, was that "an increased percentage of Caucasian blood made a more intelligent and aggressive person, one who was less likely to accept

¹⁹³ Grimes, *Life*, 29, 86.

¹⁹⁴ Douglass, "The Trials and Triumphs of Self-Made Men," 291.

enslavement.”¹⁹⁵ The fact that many ex-slave narrators happened to be mulattos didn’t help change this racist presumption; in fact, many of these authors risked implanting this notion into their narratives themselves. “The danger for these black self-explorers,” writes Andrews, “is succumbing to the racist myth that the dark self within is the essence of their primitive, anarchic ‘black self’ which must be subjugated by the ego, spokesman for the collective (white) consciousness, before they can become truly free.”¹⁹⁶ For those writers who were mulatto, like Grimes and Douglass, this dualistic struggle between the “dark self” and “white consciousness” is both social and psychological. Because Douglass and Grimes wrote and lived within a culture that instituted the identity of the mulatto as polluted, this interpretation risks penetrating their very discourse: the cultural stain, as Ricœur argues, “is a stain because it is there, mute; the impure is taught in the words that institute the taboo.”¹⁹⁷ With both whiteness and blackness within their blood, Douglass and Grimes must fight against not only a racist culture that exists outside their bodies, but also against this culture’s potential to inflict their psyche with a similarly black-versus-white tension.

Although Douglass does not display discomfort with his racial heritage in the *Narrative* itself, he certainly seemed to grow less comfortable with it in later years, particularly in reference to his white slaveholder father. In his biography on Douglass, Dickson J. Preston discusses the gradual unease with which Douglass

¹⁹⁵ Foster, *Witnessing Slavery*, 130-31.

¹⁹⁶ Andrews, *To Tell a Free Story*, 9.

¹⁹⁷ Ricœur, *The Symbolism of Evil*, trans. Emerson Buchanan (Boston: Beacon Press, 1967), 36.

spoke about his father in his three autobiographies.¹⁹⁸ In his 1845 *Narrative* Douglass openly admits, “My father was a white man. He was admitted to be such by all I ever heard speak of my parentage.”¹⁹⁹ However, in his second autobiography, *My Bondage and My Freedom*, written in 1855, Douglass displays less certainty about his white ancestry, writing that the identity of his father is “shrouded in mystery” and qualifying his original statement with the doubtful addendum, “My father was a white man, or nearly white.”²⁰⁰ Finally, as Preston notes, in *Life and Times of Frederick Douglass* (1881) he eliminates any certainty of his interracial heritage altogether, attributing his lack of knowledge to the general silence maintained on white men’s sexual exploitation of black women:

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 freeman and the child a slave. The father might be a white man, glorying in the purity of his Anglo-Saxon blood, and the child ranked with the blackest 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.²⁰¹

In a rather strategic move, Douglass utilizes the dominant white discourse’s silence on the taboo of interracial heritage to likewise keep his personal heritage unknown—he does not know his father’s identity because, as he argues, he is born into a culture that hides this knowledge.

¹⁹⁸ Preston, *Young Frederick Douglass: The Maryland Years* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1980), 23.

¹⁹⁹ Douglass, *Narrative*, 13.

²⁰⁰ Douglass, *My Bondage and My Freedom*, 52, 60.

²⁰¹ Douglass, *The Life and Times of Frederick Douglass*, ed. John Lobb (London: Christian Age Office, 1882), 3.

One likely reason that Douglass deemphasizes his mulatto status is because, at the time of his writing *Life and Times*, Douglass was no longer considered by many blacks to be a representative role model for their race. Although most Northern white journalists continued to promulgate Douglass's status as a great black leader well into the late nineteenth century, his increased political conservatism following the Civil War drew the ire of blacks who felt he had abandoned them.²⁰² African Americans' criticism of Douglass increased after he denounced the Exodus movement in the late 1870s, putting him in opposition with working-class blacks who desired to move North and avoid persecution in the South, just as Douglass himself had done when he escaped from slavery in 1838.²⁰³ By the time he penned his final autobiography in 1881, Douglass, under fire for being out of touch with most African Americans, understandably would have wished to repress his white father in order to validate his black heritage in the eyes of his critics.

Grimes, on the other hand, possessing no public persona to defend when writing his narrative, remains unapologetically open about his interracial heritage. Although Grimes occasionally displays some ambivalence over his mixed race, unlike Douglass he ultimately accepts the fact that his father was a planter and his mother a chattel, treating the fact as if it were just another incongruity in his incongruous life. Unacquainted with an abolitionist agenda that would label such a union as culturally unholy and sinful, Grimes's *Life* offers a refreshingly candid portrayal of interracial heritage, with Grimes bestowing affection on his father and

²⁰² Nell Irvin Painter, *Exodusters: Black Migration to Kansas after Reconstruction* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, Inc., 1976), 26.

²⁰³ *Ibid.*, 250.

mother both. This is not to say his autobiography is without tension regarding his interracial identity. Indeed, Grimes's references to his father, which sometimes border on admiration, occasionally veer toward the kind of internal racism cited by Foster and Andrews, wherein Grimes situates his inner whiteness as a superior force that must conquer his blackness. In discussing his father, Grimes writes that the man "suffered his blood to run in the veins of a slave," thereby emphasizing the black-tinged veins that "sufferingly" circulate his father's more purified whiteness.²⁰⁴ Moreover, Grimes later argues that the blood of his father—whose "spirit feared nothing"—is the very thing which gives him "too much sense and feeling to be a slave" and that ultimately makes him "difficult to *govern in the way in which it was attempted.*"²⁰⁵ In a subtle yet telling proclamation, Grimes even says that he "passes for a negro, though three parts white," thus identifying himself as a white mistaken as a black rather than the other way around, as is typically done according to the "one-drop" rule. Such moments of tension between Grimes and his internal blackness provide a keen demonstration of how the dominant culture's racially scripted opposition of black and white becomes, for the mulatto, a significant existential struggle—a struggle that Grimes refers to with remarkable candidness.

Despite his occasional antagonistic attitude toward his black blood, Grimes retains a close attachment to his slave mother. "It grieved me to see my mother's tears at our separation," he writes, later remarking on his sadness in

²⁰⁴ Grimes, *Life*, 31.

²⁰⁵ *Ibid.*, 47.

being “torn from the arms of my mother.”²⁰⁶ Later, Grimes fuses his emotional grief over his familial separation with a critique of slavery’s destruction of the family unit as a whole:

There is nothing in slavery, perhaps, more painful, than the unavoidable separation of parents and children. It is not uncommon to hear mothers say, that they have half a dozen children, but the Lord only knows where they are. Oh! my poor mother! but she is gone, and I presume her skin is now as white as that of her mistress.²⁰⁷

In this passage Grimes slyly implies that his mother, in death, is now “as white” and thus as racially equal to her white mistress, at least according to the racial social system which judges human beings according to their color. He emphasizes the illogicality of this color-coded system later in his autobiography when, following a scuffle with a white butcher, Grimes notes that, because he is “a *negro*,” he is treated more harshly by the authorities, in spite of the fact that the butcher’s skin “was a great deal blacker than mine.”²⁰⁸ In both of these instances, Grimes suggests that color is not as fixed as the dominant white culture may believe but in fact remains highly destabilized. Indeed, as Grimes well knows as a mulatto, color is not only subject to change and misrepresentation but also manipulation.

While Grimes may not possess the literary prowess or success of someone like Douglass, his autobiography is attuned to the deconstructive capabilities of his racial identity in ways that traditional slave narratives, in their simplified structural agendas, never could be. Grimes’s *Life* exemplifies how its

²⁰⁶ Ibid., 33, 35.

²⁰⁷ Ibid., 43.

²⁰⁸ Ibid., 106.

author's status as a mulatto allows him, like the slave witch he occasionally references, to essentially "change shape" in the eyes of his oppressors, deceiving them at every opportunity.²⁰⁹ Despite his admission that he is "never intending to tell a lie, wilfully [sic] or maliciously," Grimes is never one to balk at the chance to utilize deception, oftentimes pretending to be sick, weak, or ignorant to avoid punishment.²¹⁰ In one particularly cunning act of deception, Grimes describes how he would sometimes stir his fellow slaves to work ahead of him whenever he overslept and, in the process, increase their productivity. "Thus I gained for my master a great many hours work in the course of the season, which he knew nothing about," Grimes writes proudly, "and all for the purpose of clearing myself from blame, and perhaps a severe flogging."²¹¹ Such instances of self-protective deception in Grimes's *Life* demonstrate what Samuel G. Howe describes as the necessity of the black individual to hide "in the shadow of falsehood, more or less deeply, according as his safety or welfare seems to require it."²¹² Slavery and other injustices ultimately keep blacks like Grimes incapable of living an honest life; deceit becomes not just a necessary evil but also an advantageous tool, as Grimes's autobiography continuously illustrates.

One deceptive apparatus that Grimes utilizes throughout his *Life* is his identity as a mulatto, allowing him to deemphasize his blackness in the eyes of others. Following a scuffle with a black slave driver, Grimes defends his actions to his master by explaining that the driver "is an ignorant old African, or Guinea

²⁰⁹ Ibid., 52.

²¹⁰ Ibid., 53-55, 79, 83-84.

²¹¹ Ibid., 68-69.

²¹² Howe, *The Refugees from Slavery in Canada West* (Boston: Wright and Potter, 1865), 3.

negro, and has not judgment sufficient to superintend any one in my present situation.”²¹³ Although Grimes’s remarks could be construed as racist, they do serve the purposeful self-preserving function of allowing him to avoid punishment. After contrasting himself to the “Guinea negro,” Grimes then proceeds to bond with his master, manipulating him: “I told him I had no friend, except it was himself, and if he did not whip me when he came to the plantation, I should be convinced he was my friend.”²¹⁴ Rather than falling into racism himself, Grimes is actually using his master’s racism against him, emphasizing the “ignorance” of the slave driver’s darker skin in an effort to gain favor with his prejudiced master and thereby escape his beating. Given that his dealings with other “Guinea negroes”—such as the “poor, honest” Jack, a fellow slave²¹⁵—are considerably friendlier, Grimes’s efforts to make himself superior to the darker-skinned slave driver seem less a matter of racism than cunning self-protection, where his light-skinned identity as a mulatto serves as a racially deflective shield.

Grimes’s interracial identity is put to more purposeful use through his ability to pass as white. This is particularly helpful in allowing him to outwit Georgia’s “Savannah Watch,” a group of white males appointed to prevent slave escapes and revolts. “[T]hey always took me to be a *white man*,” Grimes boasts, indicating a certain pride in his appearance.²¹⁶ However, his motives for this deception are not merely ego-driven; indeed, much like Ellen Craft’s shielding of her husband in *Running a Thousand Miles for Freedom*, Grimes uses his light

²¹³ Grimes, *Life*, 67.

²¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 68.

²¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 80.

²¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 71.

complexion to help a fellow black slave, pretending to be the slave's master in order to protect him from abusive whites who prowl the streets at night.²¹⁷ Not only does Grimes's lighter complexion allow him to escape punishment from his masters, but it also grants him the power to protect other slaves, too, thereby revealing a deconstructive characteristic in his mulatto identity, one that works to destabilize whites' putative mastery in society through their own misguided perceptions.

These examples of deception in Grimes's *Life* exemplify elusive acts of "signifying," the long-held African Americans tradition of resisting the illusory authority of white masters through subtly subversive techniques. This art of the figurative, argues Gates, has been integral to blacks' long historical struggle, where "saying one thing to mean something quite other has been basic to black survival in oppressive Western cultures."²¹⁸ According to Foster, signifying is essentially "a method of challenging, chastising, correcting, or complementing indirectly—of persuading when [blacks] appear to be informing, of saying one thing and meaning another, of assuming that 'every good bye ain't gone."²¹⁹ Through this "indirect" method of persuasion, signifying relies not merely on the user's acts of deception but also on the self-deceptive myths of the oppressive culture. Hence, if the culture's perception is so skewed by racism as to view its demeaned subjects as incapable of intelligent resistance, then this simplistic misinterpretation can be effectively utilized in resistance.

²¹⁷ Ibid., 74.

²¹⁸ Gates, "Criticism in the Jungle," in *Black Literature and Literary Theory* (New York: Methuen, Inc., 1984), 6.

²¹⁹ Foster, *Witnessing Slavery*, xxvii-xxviii.

As a slave, Grimes finds a blind spot in his degraded status as a commodity. Despite Michael Newbury's description of slavery as an institution where the enslaved individual is "defined not only by his commodity status, but by his *absence* from the activity of monetary exchange,"²²⁰ Grimes remarkably fosters an independent presence precisely through his status as a commodity. Utilizing his masters' belief that slaves are nothing more than property to be bought and sold, Grimes finds ways throughout his *Life* to gain subtle independence in spite of—or, more accurately, because of—his perceived dependence.

From the very beginning of his narrative, Grimes displays a keen awareness of his marketable value. When being sold to his master Col. William Thornton, Grimes pays close attention to the monetary exchange in the bargaining process, noting how his first master, Doctor Steward, believes Grimes is worth £60, which prompts Thornton to offer £65.²²¹ As his narrative progresses, Grimes's awareness of his monetary value in such transactions leads to a gradually increased autonomy. Indeed, in a startling scene unlike many in the slave narrative tradition, Grimes actually intermediates himself, quite independently, between his masters Dr. Collock and Mr. Bullock. Without asking Collock's permission, Grimes first enquires with his potential buyer, Bullock, to ensure he will buy him, and then asks permission from Collock to be sold to this new master. When Collock grows suspicious, Grimes deceptively ensures his present master that Bullock approached *him*, rather than vice-versa, and

²²⁰ Newbury, *Figuring Authorship in Antebellum America*, 90.

²²¹ Grimes, *Life*, 33.

mentions that Bullock will pay \$500—the amount Grimes was previously sold for—if Collock will sell him. The transaction is a success, and Grimes is promptly sold to his intended master.²²² This amazing display of autonomy within slavery only seems to increase Grimes’s confidence later when, after growing displeased with Bullock, Grimes writes that he “then wanted some person to buy me” and “accordingly applied to a man who promised me he would try to buy me.”²²³ Although Grimes’s second intended transaction ultimately proves less successful than the first one, the casual business-as-usual tone in Grimes’s remark nevertheless demonstrates a gradual sense of entrepreneurial independence in his character.

Grimes’s understanding of monetary exchange in slavery remains not merely associated with his body but also extends to personal business ventures. While under his master Dr. Collock, Grimes raises for himself a small crop of rice and sells it in town for “\$1.25 per hundred,” making a total of “about \$5 or \$6” during each visit to town.²²⁴ Such entrepreneurial opportunities undoubtedly contributed to Grimes’s desire to escape, even if his narrative never directly mentions the association. In his study *Slaves to the Marketplace* Douglas R. Egerton writes that slaves who “grasped the power of cash,” through the hiring out of their own time or through other means, were more likely to resist authority; those who rebelled, Egerton emphasizes, “better understood the power of capital

²²² Ibid., 69-70.

²²³ Ibid., 76.

²²⁴ Ibid., 68.

and its corrosive effect on the plantation regime, than did their masters.”²²⁵

Indeed, when Grimes finally makes his escape two-thirds of the way into his autobiography, it is thanks to his business connections with some friendly Yankee sailors who, due to their fondness for Grimes, allow him to stow away on one of their cotton boats.²²⁶ Given that the cotton boats suggest the Northern states’ complicity in the economic value of slavery, the fact that Grimes makes his escape in one of these vessels provides an ironic metaphor for slave resistance. By utilizing the very market which oppresses him, Grimes puts his deceptive art of signifying into full practice.

Grimes’s gradual independence within slavery is not without some peril, however, with much of it coming from his fellow slaves. As Grimes depicts it, slavery is a place where blacks are just as apt as whites to abuse fellow blacks, destabilizing whatever racial opposition the system is meant to perpetuate. His first attempt to escape is thwarted by an old slave named “Planter George,” who initially promises to help Grimes but then betrays him the moment he falls asleep, resulting in a severe whipping for Grimes from his overseer.²²⁷ Indeed, among the primary antagonists in Grimes’s narrative are his black overseers, who seem to give him as much turmoil as his white masters. “Oh, how much have I suffered from these black drivers!” cries Grimes, qualifying his lament a few pages later with his assertion that “negro drivers and indeed the slaves, show much less

²²⁵ Douglas R. Egerton, “Slaves to the Marketplace: Economic Liberty and Black Rebelliousness in the Atlantic World,” *Journal of the Early Republic* 26, no. 4 (2006): 634, 637.

²²⁶ Grimes, *Life*, 82.

²²⁷ *Ibid.*, 37.

humanity in punishment, than the masters themselves.”²²⁸ In one particularly epic battle, he finds himself in a scuffle with about twenty fellow slaves, set upon him by a black driver who Grimes had earlier fought in the “old Virginia style,” i.e., “gouging, biting and butting.”²²⁹ Holding a stick taken from the driver, Grimes’s encounter with the group of slaves is ultimately successful:

He [the black driver] ordered them to seize me, and was in hopes they would; but one of the stoutest of them, on whom he placed the greatest reliance, came up to me to enquire what was the matter, and why I had treated the driver so. I asked how I had treated him. He replied, how did you. I then seized him by the shoulders, and said to him, I will show you. So I served him in the same way I had the driver, and almost as severe. The other negroes seeing me use this stout fellow so harshly, were afraid to touch me. I kept walking with the stick I had taken from my enemy, to and fro as before. They did not attempt after that to touch me.²³⁰

Ironically, Grimes’s ability to ward off the group of slaves is one of the few true victories of any type in his entire autobiography; indeed, the scene is probably the closest his *Life* comes to depicting the masculinized form of resistance that Douglass displays in his grand battle with Covey. Unlike Douglass, however, Grimes’s primary antagonist is not a white slave driver but a black one whom he calls his “enemy”—a word that occurs only four other times in his autobiography. In Grimes’s universe there are no clear divisions between black and white, if not also friend and enemy; like his mixed blood, slavery is presented as a confused intermediation between the two poles, where victims are just as apt to be victimizers and no one is entirely innocent.

²²⁸ Ibid., 40, 45.

²²⁹ Ibid., 67.

²³⁰ Ibid.

Slavery, Grimes suggests, functions as an ambiguously violent environment where slaves—Grimes included—are made victims precisely through their victimization of others. This point is elucidated in Grimes’s description of a slave he encounters while serving prison time:

A large, stout and athletic negro as I was ever acquainted with, was selected for the purpose of whipping those who were doomed to receive the lash. He himself being there confined for some crime he had committed. In a case of whipping, he was compelled to put it on as severely as lay in his power, or take a severe flogging himself.²³¹

Although Grimes does not explicitly reference his black slave drivers, his description of the prison slave’s induced behavior nevertheless provides a tragic rationale for these drivers’ cruelty: that they are compelled, just as the prison slave is, to beat other slaves “as severely” as possible, lest they be beaten themselves. Grimes’s black victimizers are ultimately victims themselves, oppressed by the oppression they are forced to mete out to others.

However, by demonstrating how slavery fuses victimizer and victim within a relationship where both are equally violated and thereby made powerless, Grimes’s *Life* introduces a type of instability in the slave social structure, where the master’s role as victimizer can be equally exposed as powerless. Grimes accomplishes this by utilizing his awareness of his and others’ status as commodities in order to implicitly devalue his masters’ perceived role as sole owners of their slaves. After biting off the nose of a slave named Cato during a scuffle, Grimes remarks, with a disturbing lack of moral conscience, that he “injured the sale of Cato very much,” indicating his implicit control of the slave’s

²³¹ Ibid., 65.

marketable value.²³² Most subversively, Grimes's consciousness of property damage extends to his own body as well, usually as a means to escape punishment or work, but sometimes to gain a form of independence and control. In one long and painful episode, Grimes, unsatisfied with a new master, endeavors to break his leg with an axe in order to make himself immovable (50). Although his attempt to gain power through self-mutilation proves unsuccessful, Grimes doesn't give up and instead schemes to feign illness as a means to convince his master to sell him. Performing a type of hunger strike, Grimes becomes "determined not to eat anything in his sight, or to his knowledge, in order to make him think he must either sell me or lose me."²³³ To perfect the scheme, Grimes pays a free black man named Major Lewis to convince his master that he "was really sick" and that he "should never be good for anything."²³⁴ The deceit works, and, in a moment of startling victory, Grimes describes his master's defeat:

In a few days from this, my master came down in the kitchen and says, boy get up; there, boy, (holding it out in his hand,) here is the money I gave for you: I have got my money again, and you may go and be damned; and don't you ever step into my house again; if you do, I will split your damned brains out.²³⁵

Despite his master's violent threat, Grimes's sense of triumph in the scene is palpable. By inducing his master to believe that he must make an all-or-nothing—i.e., binary-oriented—decision ("he must either sell me or lose me"), Grimes utilizes his denigrated role as a commodity to effectively sell himself to a new

²³² Ibid., 56.

²³³ Ibid., 55.

²³⁴ Ibid., 56.

²³⁵ Ibid.

master. His master's frustrated exposure of the money he's paid underscores Grimes's signifying method: it is the master's racist view of Grimes as nothing more than a monetary good which must be either sold or lost that ultimately leads to the master's inability to control Grimes. Through a painful yet keen manipulation of his commodified status, Grimes turns the simplistic mental framework against its own user and successfully reaches his desired goal.

Grimes's utilization of his own commodified status to resist and control his masters' authority demonstrates how the economic stability of slavery, including its masters' masculinity, remains dependent on—and implicitly controlled by—those whom the system oppresses. This destabilization of masculinity is evident in the slave's integral function not merely as physical exchange, but also as social exchange; as Walter Johnson notes, one of the popular ways male slaveholders made friends with each other in the antebellum South was to discuss the buying and selling of their slaves.²³⁶ Serving as a definer of Southern manhood, slavery forges a sociological relation between a master's economic ownership of his commodified humans and his own masculine identity. Through the simultaneous “assaults and sales” of the institution, writes Edward E. Baptist, white slaveholders

increasingly linked their gendered identity to the ability to hold and manipulate property as a commodity in a market. Men bought, moved, and sold things, and those who did not were not men. Thus market success, built with the bodies of black people, allowed white males to assert that they were men.²³⁷

²³⁶ Johnson, *Soul by Soul*, 197-200.

²³⁷ Baptist, “The Absent Subject,” 142-43.

Like a perverted version of Douglass's self-made man as a capitalistic hero, the white slaveholder's masculine credentials remain dependent on his successful ownership of human commodities. Without slaves, the slaveholder is without a commodity to buy, move, and sell and thus becomes feminized, unable to socialize with other slaveholders for fear his capitalistic emasculation will be exposed.

Because these commodities are human, however, they are naturally subject to potential rebellion against their owners, thereby destabilizing the latter's masculine role not only in their absence but also in their unpredictable presence. To counter such measures, slaveholders resorted to increased cruelty. "For people made out of slaves," writes Johnson, "there was no terrain of conflict with their slaves that did not represent a fundamental threat: their slaves' resistance was internal to themselves, and they maintained their dominance through force. The only slave buyers who could be assured of getting what they wanted in the slave market were the ones who bought slaves in order to torture them."²³⁸ The masters' necessitated "dominance through force," however, leads to a crippling of slavery's stability as an economically viable enterprise. According to Newbury, slavery represents a "grossly perverted" variation of free labor values, so esteemed in the North, not only because its commodities were human but because the slaveholder "ceased to honor the logic exchange, choosing instead to exercise arbitrarily and irrationally his absolute right of property, his right to consume or destroy the slave regardless of the economic

²³⁸ Johnson, *Soul by Soul*, 206.

consequences.”²³⁹ In addition to damaging the work value of his human property, the master’s cruel treatment is economically “arbitrary and irrational” because it encourages his commodities to escape. After being whipped to the point where he “could hardly stand,” Grimes testifies to this inducement, writing, “In this manner do the overseers impose on their planters and compel their slaves to run away, by cruel treatment” (37). Although the master believes he is expressing his “absolute right of property” through his needlessly cruel treatment of his slaves, this cruelty—by only increasing slaves’ desire to escape—actually works to destabilize the very market that defines his economic, masculine identity.

Because his capitalistic authority depends on an unpredictable economy, the master’s masculine role remains wobbly rather than universal, defined by its fluctuating cultural norms. The slavery-built manhood of the South illustrates how masculinity is not an inherent trait but rather what Catano describes as a “rule-governed practice [...] performed and maintained—culturally and individually—through and in terms of preset rhetorical arguments.”²⁴⁰ Due to its reliance on these “preset rhetorical arguments,” masculinity’s power, particularly as self-making performance, is deceptive; it is an identity that claims to be progressive, liberating, and powerful but is actually deeply conservative and ultimately confined by the cultural norms in which it is defined. “The deep irony of masculine self-making,” Catano adds, “lies in its claim to offer the ultimate in freely formed, self-created individualism, while it actually serves to establish a social subject, a set of behavioral patterns and expectations that are already

²³⁹ Newbury, *Figuring Authorship in Antebellum America*, 88-89.

²⁴⁰ Catano, *Ragged Dicks*, 2.

prescribed, as it were.”²⁴¹ For the slaveholder, because the “behavioral patterns and expectations” of his capitalistic masculinity are prescribed in the marketable bodies of human beings, the illusory nature of his individualism begins to reveal itself once these so-called commodities—fed up with signifying their master’s masculinity—begin to resist his illusory power. Hence, every method of resistance a slave like Grimes performs, from his self-inflicted deception to his eventual escape, poses a threat to his master’s masculine authority.

The threat to masters’ masculinity inherent in slaves’ resistance finds a reflective apparatus in the narrative framework of Grimes’s *Life*, which actively resists—like the slave to his master—the masculinity that pervades his culture. Similar to how Grimes’s self-inflections serve as a deceptive form of signifying, the wounded, structureless terrain of his narrative also performs a signifying function, utilizing its misplaced signifiers to express an empowering signified. According to Gates, signifying has traditionally served as “a vehicle for narration itself” that “turns on the play and chain of signifiers, and not on some supposedly transcendent signified.”²⁴² Because of its isolation from any purposeful metaphorical framework, Grimes’s *Life* may lack a “transcendent signified,” but the open-ended, loose signifiers that make up his narratological terrain instead allow his autobiography to resist, and destabilize, the masculine norms of American culture—norms that, following his escape from slavery, promise Grimes much but offer him little, due to his status as a black and former slave. Indeed, just as Grimes utilizes his perceived role as a commodity to resist his

²⁴¹ Ibid., 3.

²⁴² Gates, “The Blackness of Blackness: A Critique of the Sign and the Signifying Monkey,” in *Black Literature and Literary Theory* (New York: Methuen, Inc., 1984), 287.

masters' masculinized control, the commodity that is his narrative is subsequently utilized to deconstruct white-imposed paradigms of masculinity, particularly within the traditional male autobiography.

By remaining detached from the cultural binary oppositions of nineteenth-century male autobiography, the uniquely formless structure of Grimes's narrative possesses a capability to equalize the hierarchies inherent in such oppositions. In his "Introduction to the Structural Analysis of Narratives," Roland Barthes writes that when adhering to a purposeful, unifying strategy, a narrative's events can be classified into two units of "importance": *cardinal functions* (or *nuclei*), which signify an action that "is of direct consequence for the subsequent development of the story"; and *catalyzers*, which "merely 'fill in' the narrative space separating the hinge [i.e., cardinal] functions."²⁴³ The traditional slave narrative's nuclei are explicated in the four stages of the mythological structure outlined by Foster, beginning with "innocence lost" and ending in "freedom obtained," with all other events simply acting as feminized catalyzers that must submit to the genre's masculinized cardinal functions. Due to the loose, random nature of Grimes's autobiography, however, the events within his narratological structure do not necessitate a functional partition between those actions which are "cardinal" and those which are "catalyzers." Whereas in the *Narrative* Douglass must make a clear distinction between the cardinal functions of Foster's mythological pattern and the less important catalyzers in order to proclaim his masculine independence, Grimes's shapeless autobiographical terrain equalizes the masculine-infused nuclei of the slave narrative with its

²⁴³ Barthes, *Image, Music, Text*, trans. Stephen Heath (New York: Hill and Wang, 1977), 93-94.

catalyzers. This creates a narratological structure of lessened metaphorical impact, perhaps, but it also grants a new and fresh expressive capacity to events that are typically repressed in the traditional slave narrative due to masculine, bourgeois paradigms. These paradigms, according to Yarborough, are

equally imaginary in nature, essentially ideologically charged constructions serving, first, to bolster the self-image of privileged whites who endorsed and propagated them through their control of major acculturating institutions and, second, to keep marginalized those “others” who—on account of their appearance, speech, family background, class, behavior, or values—did not measure up.²⁴⁴

Without any governing nuclei to impose boundaries on what is “substantial” and “unsubstantial,” Grimes’s *Life* gains the ability to foreground those “other” aspects of his life that in any traditional American autobiography would remain marginalized to the catalyzing background, either because of their androgynous irrelevance to or feminized conflict with the genre’s masculine cardinal functions.

One of the decidedly “un-masculine” elements that surfaces due to the structureless nature of Grimes’s *Life* is its hero’s blatant fear of ghosts, skeletons, and other superstitious entities. “It was a terrible sight to me, and I was so frightened that I could not stop,” Grimes writes after discovering a group of skeletons in Master George’s house. “The holes in the skull, where the eyes are, seemed to look right at me. I turned round from them until I shut the door. I have often thought it strange that a skeleton or a corpse should terrify us, though they might shock our feelings.”²⁴⁵ Such rhetoric would not be appropriate in an autobiography emphasizing its protagonist’s masculine credentials, yet Grimes,

²⁴⁴ Yarborough, “Race, Violence, and Manhood,” 168.

²⁴⁵ Grimes, *Life*, 43.

as Andrews puts it, “is neither ashamed to admit nor intent on explaining away the power that a variety of threatening supernatural forces held over him.”²⁴⁶

Providing no signs of heroic swagger or coolness under pressure, Grimes’s professed superstitions work to chip away at the figure of the fearless hero exemplified in most male-penned slave narratives.

As an advocate for the self-made man, Douglass would undoubtedly disapprove of Grimes’s casual superstitions, not merely because they undermine masculine authority but also because he considered them to be signs of a backwards, primitive culture. As Douglass writes in his final autobiography, *The Life and Times of Frederick Douglass*, one of his primary goals when speaking to fellow blacks was to “deliver them from the power of superstition, bigotry, and priestcraft.”²⁴⁷ Despite these efforts, it is important to note that Douglass’s first autobiography is not without superstitious elements. Before his epic battle with the slavedriver Covey, Douglass obtains a root from a fellow slave named Sandy Jenkins with the instructions that “if I would take some of it with me, carrying it *always on my right side*, would render it impossible for Mr. Covey, or any other white man, to whip me.”²⁴⁸ After his fight with Covey, however, Douglass completely forgets about the root, not to mention Sandy Jenkins, and attributes his victory instead to his reignited manhood.²⁴⁹ Douglass’s brief foray into superstition is introduced only to be overthrown by his self-made masculinity, just as he hopes other blacks will do in their journeys to independence.

²⁴⁶ Andrews, ed., Introduction to *Life of William Grimes*, 21.

²⁴⁷ Douglass, *Life and Times*, 430.

²⁴⁸ Douglass, *Narrative*, 53.

²⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, 54.

Douglass's downplaying of superstition in his *Narrative* and his campaigns thereafter to discourage such beliefs miss how these mystical elements were an integral part of slave culture. In his study *Black Culture and Black Consciousness*, Lawrence W. Levine notes the importance of mystical figures like Sandy Jenkins and how they "constituted still another source of autonomous power within the slave community." To these figures, writes Levine, slaves could "bring their dilemmas and uncertainties," attempt to "find remedies and solutions to their numerous problems," and finally try to "draw assurance and strength."²⁵⁰ Indeed, some of the only moments of true anticipation for future happiness in Grimes's *Life* arise from his occasional visits to a fortune teller who, unlike his untrustworthy fellow slaves, provides Grimes with a vision of a difficult yet successful future escape. "She told I should eventually get away," writes Grimes, "but that it would be attended with a great deal of trouble; and truly, I experienced a vast deal of trouble before I could get away."²⁵¹ In contrast to Douglass's notion of anticipated freedom through self-made masculinity, one of Grimes's sole references to his future escape from slavery is attributed not merely to a fortune teller but, more surprisingly, given the gendered norms of his society, to a *woman*. The degree of respect Grimes gives to this elderly woman as a faithful conveyor of his future escape grounds his journey in an ethos that, per his narrative's equalization of nuclei and catalyzers, does not subordinate the feminine. If anything, such scenes suggest that Grimes's autobiography favors the feminine over the masculine in its foresight.

²⁵⁰ Levine, *Black Culture and Black Consciousness: Afro-American Folk Thought from Slavery to Freedom* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1977), 69-70.

²⁵¹ Grimes, *Life*, 51.

Granted, Grimes's *Life* is not entirely free of sexism. Despite his autobiography's isolation from the predominant masculine metaphorical structures of the time, Grimes is still a part of a culture that devalues the feminine, as his occasional descriptions of the female sex demonstrate. In one particularly sexist critique of the "sluttish" behavior and "natural" vanity of women—save his beloved wife—Grimes remarks:

Yet I do reckon the generality of girls are sluttish, though my wife is not. When a servant, and since too, I have seen so much behind the curtain, that I don't want told. I recollect one student telling a story of this sort, when I was in the room. An acquaintance of his had been courting a lady some time, and I forget how it was exactly, but after he married her, come to see her in the morning, with all the curls, ribbons, combs, caps, earrings, wreaths, &c., &c., stripped off, he did not know her.²⁵²

What is revealing about this passage, however, is the way Grimes backs up his claim of girls' "sluttish" nature with a story from one of the venerated white college students he serves as a waiter. This story contextualizes Grimes's sexism within the influence of the upper-class students he clearly looks up to, if not also the masculine, white-dominated culture they represent, where his rigid views on women are likely provoked by his desire to be "one of the boys." Indeed, in only a few sentences preceding this passage, Grimes confirms that these very students spurred his search for a wife:

I used to hear students say something about taking Yankee girls for wives, and I thought I would look round and see if I could find one. I had a great many clothes from the students, and I could rig myself up mighty well. And I have always seen that the girls seemed to like those best who dressed the finest.²⁵³

²⁵² Ibid., 97.

²⁵³ Ibid.

Explicitly revealing his upper-class aspirations, Grimes even borrows the students' clothes in order to perform upper-class masculinity. The suggestion that to attract women he must literally disguise his lower-class status in upper-class clothing subversively links masculinity not only to wealth but to *fashion*, wherein the phallus's supposedly naturalized signified is exposed to be merely a signifier, utilized by the white upper-class to present a myth of masculinity. Moreover, by publicizing his adoption of an artificial appearance as a courting ritual, Grimes undermines his subsequent critique of females' "sluttish" vanity, suggesting that this critique, like his own dressing up, is nothing more than a gendered posture. The "curls, ribbons, combs, caps, earrings, wreaths" that females wear in order to impress males is but a reflection of Grimes's own wearing of the students' clothing in order to impress females, suggesting that males and females alike share class-conscious desires to signify the gendered codes of the dominant culture.

Undermining his role as a stable patriarchal authority, Grimes is remarkably candid about his occasional drunkenness, consequently revealing even more about his upper-class desires and the implicit equalization of genders that these desires carry. Grimes's admission of his drinking problem not only risks lowering his masculine credentials as a self-made man but also risks losing his sympathy, particularly from white readers who might associate Grimes's drunken behavior with his natural defects as a black man. In one particularly unflattering scene, Grimes, after meeting with his brother Benjamin, buys some rum and, "not thinking," indulges himself. "I got drunk and fell down in the street,"

he writes. "Some of my friends took me up and carried me in, and I slept till most night, when I started for home, and rode with all haste, lest my master should flog me for staying."²⁵⁴ Such a scene does not do much for Grimes's masculine independence, portraying him as a man in need of his friends' help and not in control of his faculties, nor does it do much to gain the sympathy of contemporaneous white readers who, stereotyping the black as naturally inclined to drinking anyway, might just as well say that Grimes deserves whatever punishment he gets.

The more Grimes depicts his alcoholic tendencies in his *Life*, however, the more it becomes clear that drinking functions as a way for him to forget his constant troubles, within both the physical bondage of slavery and his economic troubles in the North thereafter. Working as a waiter in Connecticut, Grimes tells of enjoying a drunken evening with his revered college students in a scene that, with implicit tragedy, reveals the repressed class desire that motivates Grimes's drinking:

One of [the college students] would say, Mr. Grimes, a glass of wine with you, sir; and the next gentleman would say the same, and so they kept on, until I had got two glasses to their one all round the table. I began to feel myself on a footing with them, and made as free with them as they did with me, and drank with them, and they would set me to making speeches, They not only drank with me themselves, until they got me as drunk as a fool, but they called in Peter Hamden, who was going along, and made him drink a glass of brandy and water with me. At last I took the floor and lay there speechless some hours. I had two or three apprentice boys; towards night, they came after me and led me home. I never was so drunk in my life before.²⁵⁵

²⁵⁴ Ibid., 44.

²⁵⁵ Ibid., 94.

Here, Grimes offers the reader a glimpse of the genuine joy he experiences in drinking—a joy that helps him forget he is but a black waiter, reduced to serving the white upper-class, and instead lets him be “one of the college boys.” As someone who spends most of his freed life trying to hold stable jobs and making a steady living, Grimes’s drunkenness seems to allow him to cast aside his masculine failures, at least for a few hours, and be “on a footing” with these upper-class whites who, in his culture, define self-made masculinity. The underlying sadness of the scene is accentuated in the implication that the white college boys are actually making fun of their black waiter, which Grimes himself seems to be aware of when he mentions that, while drunk, he “made as free with them as they did with me.” One receives the impression, though, that even if Grimes was aware of the boys’ making sport of him, he would not care; a night of drunken bliss is good enough for him, no matter what the motivations of his white companions might be.

The implicitly tragic nature of Grimes’s drunkenness in the scene is made apparent when he returns home to his wife. “I looked so like death,” he writes, “my wife was shocked at the sight of me.”²⁵⁶ In one sentence Grimes make a sudden shift in tone, transitioning immediately from his enjoyment with the college boys to the horrified reaction of a wife who, acting as a self-reflecting mirror, exposes the repressed melancholy of her merry-making husband. In light of the absence of women in Douglass’s autobiography, what is especially remarkable about this scene is that it essentially foregrounds Grimes’s wife, giving credence not only to her opinion of him but also her subjective viewpoint.

²⁵⁶ Ibid., 94.

Unlike Douglass, who barely even mentions his wife, much less her assistance in helping him escape, Grimes actually goes as far as to lower himself in his wife's eyes, implying that at times she, not he, was the stable force in their marriage.

Grimes moreover implies that his wife played a supportive and key role not merely in his marriage but in the writing of his autobiography. Literacy, that proleptic signifier of masculine anticipation in Douglass's *Narrative*, is in Grimes's *Life* typically either a nonissue or ironically a stumbling block. Reading and writing are not mentioned as a contributing factor at all to Grimes's escape, and when he highlights his ability to write at an early point in his autobiography, it is merely to tell how he was falsely accused of scrawling some insulting remarks about Dr. Seward, a colleague of his master.²⁵⁷ The only positive remark Grimes can make about literacy is in relation to his wife. In an admission that would have likely shocked Douglass, Grimes humbly remarks that he learned to read and write primarily thanks to the help of his wife's "tolerable good education."²⁵⁸ By downplaying—if not completely eradicating—literacy's necessity for escape and granting its power to his wife, Grimes subverts the masculine metaphorical structures of male autobiography and instead highlights the collaborative and substantial role that his spouse played in his life, suggesting that the feminine may not only have brought stability to his household but was also indirectly responsible for the writing of his autobiography itself.

Grimes's reference to his wife's role in improving his literacy demonstrates how his narrative, existing apart from the structuring metaphors of traditional

²⁵⁷ Ibid., 61-62.

²⁵⁸ Ibid., 103.

autobiography, remains an open document, free from the constraints of any rigid nuclei and all the more inclusive to others—including his own readers—because of its catalyzing nature. “My readers may put their own constructions and draw inferences,” writes Grimes, adding, “I can barely state that I tell the truth.”²⁵⁹ Grimes’s truth is inherent in the variety of non-masculine perspectives that his autobiography exhibits, ranging from the feminine viewpoint of his wife to his candid, equally-judgmental remarks on masters, slaves, and other characters. This inclusive nature of Grimes’s *Life*, wherein others’ perspectives are just as apt to be brought to attention as Grimes’s own, is especially apparent in his tribute to “Barber Thompson,” a fellow fugitive slave living in New Haven who Grimes generously describes as “honest and clever” and “the greatest barber in America.”²⁶⁰ Like Grimes, though, Barber Thompson lacks money, so when he dies, Grimes has the man buried in his own grounds, without a proper marker. “That poverty which often leaves my wife and children without a supper, may well excuse me for leaving his grave nameless,” apologizes Grimes. He then proceeds to share the epitaph he intended to put on Thompson’s stone, provided he had sufficient funds to do so:

Here lies old Thompson! And how he is dead,
I think some one should tell his story;
For while men’s faces must be shaved,
His name should live in glory.²⁶¹

Although Grimes expresses regret at being unable to afford this inscription for his good friend, by inscribing it in his narrative Grimes provides ample compensation

²⁵⁹ Ibid., 60.

²⁶⁰ Ibid., 99.

²⁶¹ Ibid.

for the nameless grave-dweller. Today, Thompson's name truly does "live in glory" due to its appearance in Grimes's autobiography—an honor far more enduring than a gravestone, especially now that Grimes's *Life* has been discovered and canonized in the slave narrative genre.

If Grimes's narrative functions thematically and aesthetically as a wound, as discussed in chapter three, another fitting metaphor is that of a cemetery—populated with gravestones cracked and long forgotten, but serving as a memorial for the lives of those who would otherwise remain nameless, including Grimes himself. Like the epitaph for Barber Thompson, Grimes manages to provide a memorial for his own self in the form of a ballad, included in the addendum to the second edition of the autobiography that he published thirty years later. Written by one of Grimes's self-proclaimed "best friends" from New Haven, the ballad, called "Old Grimes' Son," provides an apt summary of the unpredictable, contradictory life of the ex-slave. "He is a man of many parts," the ballad proclaims, indicating his complex, multifaceted life, if not also his interracial identity; moreover, the title of the ballad itself, in referencing Grimes's white father, underscores Grimes's ambiguous relationship with his mixed racial background. Other lines in the ballad hint at his difficult working-class life: "He is kind and lib'ral to the poor, / That is, to number one," suggesting Grimes's close kinship with poverty, while "He's always ready for a job— / (When paid)— whate'er you choose" explicates Grimes's difficulty in finding a steady, financially stable career in the North. His time in slavery is explicitly referenced only once, with the ballad adding that Grimes now sports a "freeman's cap," although other

lines—“At leisure he prefers to walk, / And when in haste, he runs”—certainly suggest the anxiety of being a fugitive slave, where one must continue to “run” even in the so-called free states. Indeed, the ballad subtly deconstructs the illusory geographical divide between the Northern and Southern states when it asserts that Grimes “drooped beneath the southern skies” and “tread on northern snows,” consequently equalizing his struggles in both regions into experiences not unlike one another.²⁶² All in all, the ballad functions as Grimes’s *Life* in minuscule form, even if its general tone is more optimistic than Grimes’s own ruminations in other parts of the autobiography.

Like slaves’ deconstructive utilization of song in spirituals to critique their masters, Grimes’s inclusion of “Old Grimes’ Son” in his *Life* uses the musical form of the ballad to configure his wounded memories into a harmonious, empowering order that positions his narrative as a legitimate discourse in the slave narrative and autobiographical tradition, thereby subverting the perceptions of a dominant culture that would characterize Grimes’s history as one not worth telling. By setting the details of his difficult journey to song and inscribing it into the pages of his autobiography, Grimes momentarily casts his persona—as impoverished and feminized as it may be—in the heroic mode, proclaiming it, against all odds, to be as worth remembering as any American subject. “A man remarkable as this, / Must sure immortal be,” asserts the ballad’s author, solidifying Grimes’s memory in his narrative just as he did earlier for Barber Thompson.²⁶³ Immortality may have eluded Grimes for the nineteenth and most

²⁶² Ibid., 99.

²⁶³ Ibid., 109.

of the twentieth century, but now that his autobiography has been rediscovered, his proclamation rings true every time someone, like the writer of “Old Grimes’ Son,” memorializes Grimes in some form of discourse, whether it be a public lecture or a master’s thesis.

Grimes’s recognition of his wife’s assistance, his tribute to Thompson, his best friend’s ballad, and today his solidified reputation in modern literary criticism all represent a means of empowerment that relies not on masculine self-making but rather on communal support. His autobiography’s focus on interdependence over independence could be considered ironic, considering that discursively Grimes remains among the most independent of slave narrators. However, it is precisely because Grimes’s narrative is uncensored that its communal aspect should be treated seriously as an honest alternative to the self-made ethos advocated by the likes of Douglass and other masculine-minded Americans. Having no white editors to censor his words or projected reading public to worry about pleasing, Grimes could portray himself as the most self-made man in all history if he so desired; surely he was no stranger to deception. But Grimes actively rejects such a temptation, instead portraying himself time and time again in his *Life* as a man who, dire and destitute, ultimately needs others’ assistance. In the closing remarks of his second edition, Grimes even appeals to his readers by asking them to purchase copies of his narrative.²⁶⁴ Only by the financial contribution of the reading public, Grimes implies, will his narrative have the happy ending he so desires.

²⁶⁴ Grimes, *Life*, 118.

Grimes's inclusion of his wife, Barber Thompson, and his readers themselves into his narrative demonstrates its uniquely polyphonic nature. His *Life* is, as Mikhail Bakhtin would put it, a text that at times "is constructed not as the whole of a single consciousness, absorbing other consciousnesses as objects into itself, but as a whole formed by the interaction of several consciousnesses, none of which entirely becomes an object for the other."²⁶⁵ Grimes's tendency to incorporate a multivocal viewpoint arises not from any intention to create a universal proclamation against the injustices of slavery or any other polemical strategy; rather, it simply seems a product of his compassionate sensibility, desiring to provide an expressive field within his text for the identities of those who have become an integral part of his life and who, without Grimes's inclusion, would remain nameless. Separated from the binaries of race, religion, and gender that would later come to define the slave narrative genre, the multiple identities in Grimes's *Life* reflect the complex tapestry that is Grimes's own life. Indeed, if it were not for the deconstructive characteristics of his narrative, these voices would barely have room to exist at all. Despite its tendency to veer away from any stable thematic structure or metaphorical framework, Grimes's *Life* finally erects itself as a sheltering edifice for identities too complex to be accurately depicted in the masculine and polemical requirements of traditional male slave narratives. At the center of this open-ended and inclusive structure rests William Grimes—an ex-slave who, in writing honestly and independently of his failures to achieve self-made manhood in a

²⁶⁵ Bakhtin, *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics*, ed. and trans. Caryl Emerson (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1984), 18.

culture too rigid to accept him, nevertheless formed one of the most self-made narratives in the history of the genre.

Chapter 5

CONCLUSION

Both Grimes's *Life* and Douglass's *Narrative* demonstrate differing examples of how a male ex-slave responds to a masculinized cultural milieu in writing. When Douglass's *Narrative* was published in 1845, the political environment—with the abolitionist movement in full swing and its participants eager to expose the dehumanizing effects of slavery—was ripe and ready for this testimony of an ex-slave's journey from Southern slavery to Northern freedom. Moreover, unlike Grimes, Douglass wrote his autobiography at a point in time when the thematic scope and discursive rules of the slave narrative genre, largely shaped by the self-empowering characteristics of the U.S. male autobiography, were largely set in place. For Douglass, the literary landscape of male slave narratives was an already forged terrain where he could make his own personal mark, albeit one restricted—like any developed road system—by the narratological and polemical constraints of the genre, which included but were certainly not limited to a rigid adherence to a simplistic slavery-to-freedom model that reduced the complexity of Northern “freedom” and the necessary sponsorship of white abolitionists that kept Douglass's authority confined in the grips of a racist society poised to question the validity of his testimony otherwise.

Of course, Douglass would later cast away these restrictions when he went on to write his longer—and decidedly more complex—autobiographies, but the establishment of his identity in the American public eye was nevertheless founded in norms and codes of the traditional slave narrative. Rather than being

constrained by the genre's restrictions, however, Douglass utilized its particular boundaries, especially in its reliance on the nineteenth-century binaries of race and gender, to form an exemplary and highly critical examination of slavery. Exposing the manner in which slavery perverted traditional gender norms, Douglass strategically introduced a point of identification for his mainly white readers that comfortably reconfirmed the hierarchical binary of male over female so that he could then make the more controversial act of reversing the hierarchical binary of white over black. If man, by his traditional gender role, must be self-made and independent, Douglass reasons, then the enslaved black man must rebel against the racial codes that seek to emasculate him. Otherwise, the gender binaries that sustain a "harmonious" society—and that slavery works to corrupt—will begin to crack.

What Grimes reveals in his narrative, written twenty years before Douglass's, is that such cracks in traditional cultural binaries are necessary to express the complex social statuses of male ex-slaves who, even after escaping from slavery, remained in a disturbing flux between bondage and freedom and, consequently, femininity and masculinity. Whereas Douglass uses the gendered norms of nineteenth-century America in order to critique the gender-perverting institution of slavery and thereby advocate his self-made manhood, Grimes offers an identity corrupted and broken, lacking the means to assert a masculine independence but asserting an honesty that deconstructs—and ultimately transcends—the gender norms that seek to castrate him and the self-made model of success that seeks to damn him. In the sense that Grimes's *Life*

presents an identity unformed and without a purposeful metaphorical framework, it works to reject what McWhorter labels in the modern black American mentality as the tendency to transform victimhood “from a problem to be solved into an identity in itself.”²⁶⁶ By configuring his wounded identity within the structureless patterns of his narrative, Grimes creates an unfulfilled void within his narrative’s aesthetic that reflects the solution which he and everyone else in his position needs: the help and assistance of others, to fill in the loose gaps and to provide for one another the comfort and security that the governing nation refuses them.

That Grimes’s autobiography fails to follow a clearly spiritual, masculinized framework is irrelevant; the signifiers of his testimony transcend any metaphorical signified through their ability to harbor, in their broken surface and hidden cracks, the voices of those typically made absent in the slave narrative genre: the independent wives whose literacy exceeds that of their husbands, the working-class barbers without money for a grave, and, finally, the complex, imperfect, but invariably honest human being that is Grimes himself, neither fully white nor black, just as he is neither fully enslaved nor free. By implicitly signifying itself as just another American autobiography, Grimes’s *Life* deceives the hierarchical binary oppositions of its culture by presenting a narrative that appears aesthetically corrupt yet, through this very corruption, constructs a freeform, inclusive environment, for both the individuals in Grimes’s life as well as the readers themselves. His offer in his narrative’s introduction—“Let anyone

²⁶⁶ John H. McWhorter, *Losing the Race: Self-Sabotage in Black America* (New York; HarperCollins Publishers, 2000), 2.

imagine this, and think what I have felt"²⁶⁷—may simply be a plea to his readers for sympathy, but it essentially explicates the openly collaborative nature of his enterprise. The readers' participatory, imaginative interpretation of Grimes's *Life*, to "think what he has felt," functions even today as yet another step in the promotion of Grimes's singular identity. We may never be able to fully understand Grimes's complex identity, but we can at least embrace and endorse this complexity in protest of the cultural binary oppositions that, even today, seek to simplify the heroes of our past.

Not merely an expression of its author's complex identity, Grimes's *Life* moreover serves as a useful and revealing literary apparatus, deconstructing the structural and thematic characteristics that would shape later examples in the slave narrative genre. Because it was published independently before the genre had solidified its particular structures and themes into a working model, Grimes's narrative exposes the problematic elements of ex-slaves' lives in the antebellum U.S.. It provides for the modern reader a clearer understanding of the cultural norms and polemical requirements imposed upon the slave narrative genre and how its authors worked within these impositions to establish their identities. Grimes's *Life* is a slave narrative that, by its very differences from subsequent works in the genre, reveals what makes the slave narrative arguably one of the most complex autobiographical forms of expression in American literary history.

²⁶⁷ Grimes, *Life*, 29.

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