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"The Joyous Circle": The Vernacular Presence in Frederick Douglass's Narratives Valerie Babb

It was impossible for me to repeat the same old story [. . .]
and to keep my interest in it [. . .]. I was growing, and needed
room.
—Frederick Douglass

While much of the critical attention paid to Frederick Douglass addresses his use of literacy to find voice and being in his ascendancy from slave to man, his employment of vernacular tradition to tell his story in his own way often goes unnoted. An examination of the revisions Douglass made as his *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass* (1845) metamorphosed into *My Bondage and My Freedom* (1855) and ultimately into the *Life and Times of Frederick Douglass* (1881, 1892) reveals a skilled writer giving increasing attention to traditions "within the circle" that validate the cultural legitimacy of his African American antecedents. From edition to edition Douglass expanded scenes in which an African-derived presence manifested in vernacular atavisms became an alternative to the logocentrism that erased or devalued African American expression. Why, then, do most readings of his life story focus mainly on Douglass's relationship to the written word?

The typical critical paradigm reads Douglass as a black object transforming itself into subject by seizing a forbidden literacy. A sampling of some of the many fine scholars espousing this view includes Lisa Yun Lee, who notes, "The connection between the power of thinking and speech is realized as Douglass the silent marginalized man transitions to active individual when a mistress cracks an opening in the white discourse. She offers to teach him to read" (55); such a sampling would also include Eric Sundquist, who observes that Douglass's "autobiographical writings make evident the subversive lesson young Frederick first learned in reading the alphabet—that literacy is power" (121); and it would include Houston Baker, who writes, "unlike white Americans who could assume literacy and familiarity with existing literary models as norms, the slave found himself without a system of written language—'uneducated' [. . .]. Only by grasping the word could he engage in the speech acts that would ultimately define his selfhood" (97). Others who read Douglass in this manner are Teresa A. Goddu and Craig

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V. Smith, Ann Kibbey and Michelle Stepto, and Robert Stepto; I too have offered a similar reading (see Babb, "Liberation").

What these assessments share is an awareness of the ways in which American culture links literacy to social power. It is hard to dispute that for an enslaved African American to become part of the nineteenth-century European American literary establishment required mastery of American and English written prose, a mastery denied him or her by lack of formal education and/or literacy laws. To gain public recognition of written efforts further meant shunning African American vernacular traditions and adopting forms approved by the dominant white culture. Such conditions made self-authentication and validation of cultural forms from "within the circle" difficult to effect. The narratives of Frederick Douglass, however, reveal a writer who undermined these circumstances through what Daneen Wardrop terms an "appropriation of white racist logos" (650). Though he masterfully adopts conventions that cast copy books and the Columbian Orator as vehicles of salvation, the appearance of African American vernacular retentions in Douglass's revisions asks us to rethink the portrait of a slave whose anguished acquisition of literacy transforms him from beast to man, and to consider his use of the vernacular to assert cultural legitimacy.

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Douglass's narratives consistently make room for his culture's ways of telling. His treatment of his own family history is an instance. As he fleshes out the early scenes of his life, the centrality of the oral tradition to communal continuity receives particular attention, though not overtly. *The Narrative* and *My Bondage* both tell of slavery's design to erase personal, familial, and cultural knowledge, and both, at the same time, show how oral traditions allowed for their maintenance. In the *Narrative* Douglass recalls slavery's intent to foster fragmentation:

My mother and I were separated when I was but an infant—before I knew her as my mother. It is a common custom, in the part of Maryland from which I ran away, to part children from their mothers at a very early age. [. . .] For what

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this separation is done, I do not know, unless it be to hinder the development of the child's affection toward its mother, and to blunt and destroy the natural affection of the mother for the child. This is the inevitable result. (48)

Douglass's detailing of lost domesticity is especially moving, designed to elicit empathy from all but the most resistant reader. But there is a subtext within this description, one casting orality as an antidote to practices of slavery aimed at undercutting African American familial continuity.

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Douglass wrote and rewrote his narrative. The slave steeped in the orality of his community found ways to honor it in the crafting of his written narrative, and we as readers should do no less. To read his work solely through a logocentric lens overlooks revisions that memorialize a vernacular presence. Douglass's skill foreshadows other writers who will use style to symbolize cultural emancipation: Charles Chesnutt, who will subvert the frame tale to validate the voice of Uncle Julius and Sea Island traditions; Zora Neale Hurston, who will make written prose speak in telling Janie's story; and Langston Hughes, who will imbue his lays with cadences of the blues and jazz (see Babb, "Subversion" and "Women"). For Douglass, a former slave, to engage in what is tantamount to an aesthetic assertion of racial and cultural pride was indeed a risky enterprise in the middle-to-late nineteenth century. That he did so sheds light on how much he valued traditions of the "joyous circle."

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