

The Rhetoric of Sound:

Listening to Frederick Douglass's 1845 Narrative

Research in Sound

Combats Ignorance and Southern Propaganda and Opinion

- In his *Narrative*, Douglass **brings the soundscape of the plantation and slavery to his readers** because most of them, white Northerners, have not been to a plantation, or seen or heard slavery. They are ignorant of the cruelty and reality of slavery because the sounds of slavery are not a part of their Northern soundscape and Douglass's use of sound immerses them in it and teaches them (Furlonge & Schafer). **"Aural structures of knowing... increase consciousness of a horrific event that [listeners] have not actually lived nor are actually required to live firsthand"** (Furlonge 88).
- "Southerner's flooded the market with pamphlets, books, and images that depicted slaves as happy and content and masters as benevolent and fatherly" (Stauffer 16).
- By presenting this soundscape, Douglass also **combats the image of the content slave** (i.e. screaming under the lash) **and benevolent, Christian master** (i.e. a cruel abuser lashing the slave with the whip and his profanity, and whose dialogue is reduced to mainly profanity) and disrupts Southerners' portrayal of the **south as a place of quietude and tranquility worthy of protection**. (Stover)

Research in Silence

Cheryl Glenn & Rhetoric of Silence: **all silence has meaning and it's an expressive power** not to be overlooked as passivity.

Communicates the Reality of Slavery:

- In his *Narrative*, Douglass displays **communal silence**, silence as a shared experience within the slave community as "slaveholders expected their African American property to be silent inferiors" (Jones 4).
- Silence is **present and identified in each story he shares about other slaves** (i.e. **Aunt Hester**—silenced by the whip and unable to articulate her experience, **young and old Barney**—the horse caretakers who are **forced to listen** to their master's complaints and receive punishment in silence, **Demby**—the slave who gets shot in the river refusing to answer or obey Mr. Gore, **Henrietta and Mary**—never speak a word in their scene and work around their master and mistress in silence (Glenn).
- **Negative silence** is present in the scene where Aunt Hester is being whipped as young **Douglass is struck speechless** in the face of such violence, torture, and dehumanization. Also displayed through his **inability to describe the emotions he felt in this moment**: silence due to being **emotionally overwrought** (Glenn). This silence **also displays that the inhuman treatment and abuse of slaves was so cruel it was unspeakable** (Jones).

Communicates powerlessness, pain, marginalization:

- Douglass's narrative silence, as a **"voiceless observer"** who is not allowed to speak and only be a witness, communicates and symbolizes the **marginalization of the slave** as they are **not allowed to speak** and thus **be a part of the dominant discourse** (Lee).
- Silence represents pain, anguish, and powerlessness, especially the female slaves: "while illustrating his own silence, Douglass illustrates the women's pain through their own silence...[repeatedly] the **black women** of this book are tortured and humiliated yet **denied any means of expression or escape**" (Lee 53).

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- Also, **slaveholders tried to make this image a reality as they attempted to control the soundscape of their plantations** (i.e. regulating the times in which slaves could sing in the fields, imposing silence on slaves to create quiet, but allowing and encouraging sounds of industry and industriousness: slaves working in the fields, in the black smithery, grinding grain, etc.) (Smith)
- Encourages Audiences to Listen and Challenges their Listening
- Through this sonic structure, Douglass **encourages his audience to listen and hear the plight of the slave**. He also **challenges listeners' association of black sound with passionate expression, animalism, and blackness**, which trivializes and dehumanizes the slave. Douglass combats these stereotypes by **inverting** the association of nonverbal sound with blackness and associating it with the master (i.e. depicting Captain Anthony aroused by the sounds of Hester's screams and placing her screams at the beginning and end of the scene to indicate them as sounds to listen to, not noise relegated to the background. (Stover)

Symbolized Power and Hierarchy

- Speech as a form of sound in the *Narrative* symbolizes power, as **those who have dialogue or are speaking** in a scene are **in positions of power** and usually members of the dominant group (i.e. masters, overseers, and later Douglass as he gains literacy and becomes an active speaker). (Glenn & Lee)

- Many slaves throughout the *Narrative*, including Douglass, are **made to suffer punishment and the lash in silence and even die in silence**. Ex: The nameless slave who died after her mistress beat her breaking her breastbone for nonresponding fast enough to the baby crying. The murder went unpunished thus the case was doomed to obscurity and silence (Douglass 37).

Symbolizes Subversion, Strategy, and Rebellion:

- **Douglass: undermines the authority of his masters and the slave system** by **refusing to sing** on command (Jones & Lee), **hiding silently in the corn field** to avoid a whipping from Covey, and refusing to disclose the details of his escape in order to **"keep the merciless slaveholder profoundly ignorant of the means of flight...leave him to imagine himself...let him be left to eel his way in the dark"** (Douglass 100).
- **Demby: evokes silent resistance** as he **refuses to obey Mr. Gore's commands** to come out of the river to be whipped.

Symbolizes and exerts Power and a Threat:

- Douglass's silence about his escape is intended to exert power over his masters and other slave owners by keeping them ignorant and make them feel like they are surrounded by a hidden force: **"I would leave him to imagine himself surrounded by myriads of invisible tormentors, ever ready to snatch from his infernal grasp his trembling prey...let him feel that at every step he takes, in pursuit of the flying bondman, he is running the frightful risk of having his brains dashed out by an invisible agency"** (Douglass 100).



Sound in Douglass's Narrative

- Morning Bell/Horn
- Clanking Chains
- Baying Blood Hounds
- Profanity
- Slave Songs & Singing
- Shrieking & Groaning
- Whipping & Lashing

"If anyone wishes to be impressed with the soul-killing effects of slavery, let him go to Colonel Lloyd's plantation...and there let him, in silence, analyze the sounds that shall pass through the chambers of his soul" (Douglass 28).

"Silence can be something **one does**, something **that is done** to someone, or something **one experiences"** (Glenn 9)

Silence in Douglass's Narrative

Silencing: masters silence their slaves by barring access to literacy and requiring slaves to be silent (Glenn).

Active Silence: choosing to be silent (i.e. disobeying a command to speak or sing), withholding information, and slave as a silent judge: "it is the silent listener who judges, and who **thereby exerts power over the one who speaks** (Foucault qtd in Glenn 10).

Communal Silence: all slaves share the experience of imposed silence and silencing (Glenn).

Narrative Silence: Douglass is a "voiceless observer" and not allowed to speak in the first half of the novel (Lee).

Listening: a form of silence either imposed or active and strategic (Furlonge, Glenn, Lee & Smith).

"Negative Silence:" happens in situations where "fear, hatred, anger, or acute anxiety strike us dumb'...**the person is 'too overwrought to speak or cannot find the words to express his or her feelings'"** (Glenn 17).

Frederick Douglass as Orator

Douglass deliberately used aural strategies **"to immerse and persuade his audiences in his speeches: mimicry/imitation, variation in tone, weaving nonverbal sounds of slavery into his vivid images of slavery (i.e. describing **slaves groaning** under the weight of their wounds, and the **blood dripping** from lash wounds). Douglass grew up in the oral tradition of the slave community which included story-telling, religious preaching, and singing. As a child he witnessed storytellers oral style that included:**

David N. Johnson who saw Douglass speak in the Lynn, Massachusetts commented **"Listeners...never forgot his burning words, his pathos, nor the rich play of his humor... the roll of his splendid voice...Then with inimitable mimicry he would give a droll recital of some ludicrous scene in his experience as a slave"** (Lampe 70).

My Argument

In his classic slave narrative, Douglass uses both silence and sound to portray the reality of slavery, immerse his audience, combat Southerners/Slaveowners' narrative, and show that slaves are not content and still resist.

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