"While I Am Writing": Webster's 1825 Spelling Book, the Ell, and Frederick Douglass's Positioning of Language
Author(s): Daneen Wardrop
Published by: Indiana State University
Stable URL: http://www.jstor.org/stable/2901243
Accessed: 24-08-2014 00:56 UTC

Your use of the JSTOR archive indicates your acceptance of the Terms & Conditions of Use, available at http://www.jstor.org/page/info/about/policies/terms.jsp
JSTOR is a not-for-profit service that helps scholars, researchers, and students discover, use, and build upon a wide range of content in a trusted digital archive. We use information technology and tools to increase productivity and facilitate new forms of scholarship. For more information about JSTOR, please contact support@jstor.org.
"While I Am Writing": Webster’s 1825 Spelling Book, the Ell, and Frederick Douglass’s Positioning of Language

In his 1845 narrative Frederick Douglass recounts going to the wharf of Mr. Waters and helping two Irishmen unload a scow. During the course of their work, the two men advise Douglass to run away to the North, and Douglass starts to hope that at some time in the future he will gain his freedom by writing his own pass. This segment about freedom by passage to the North segues easily to the concise assertion: “Meanwhile, I would learn to write” (86). In the next paragraph Douglass describes learning to write by noticing the letters marked on pieces of unconstructed ships. What this section of the narrative encapsulates for the reader is the fragmented nature of the signifier for Douglass. From the almost absurdly apt and associative name Mr. Waters, to the signifiers designating the parts of ships, Douglass locates his position as a slave learning to broach the logos of the dominating white culture. As Houston Baker suggests, Douglass “appropriated language in order to do battle with the masters” (45). Douglass starts to learn the written language of the oppressors by learning letters written on fragments of a ship—that is, he learns from a position that allows us to perceive the dismantled character of language as it is learned by a person marginalized by his society.

I am interested in tracking the ways in which Douglass’s signifiers jostle and disrupt the dominant signifying system. The collision of language systems often induces Douglass to use signification in an exacerbated way, as for instance by using irony. Henry Louis Gates notes Douglass’s use of irony when he states that “to attempt to employ a Western language to posit a black self is inherently to use language ironically” (Figures 117). Gates mentions Lacan’s conception that the speaking subject can be projected into discourse, and then adds that to “become subjects, as it were, black ex-slaves had to demonstrate their language-using capacity before they could become social and historical entities.” Gates sees this perspective as substituting one kind of slavery for another, substituting for bodily slavery a kind of slavery of discourse. The key question, though, is “ ‘Whose language?’ ” (Figures 105). Gates’s perception that there are two different languages or systems of signification at work is instrumental to my understanding of the activity of the signifier in Douglass’s narrative, for Douglass widens the activity of the signifier in United States literature. I wish to show this activity most specifically by exploring the ways in which Douglass overturned and appropriated his first texts: dictionary, ship timber, and Webster’s copybook. As regards the last of these, I will examine the 1825 text, The American Spelling Book, by Noah Webster, in order to see Frederick Douglass’s most radical appropriation.

Daneen Wardrop teaches American literature at Western Michigan University, where she is an associate professor. Her book Emily Dickinson’s Gothic: Goblin with a Gauge was published by the University of Iowa Press in 1996. Her articles have appeared in journals such as Texas Studies in Literature and Language, ATQ, and The Emily Dickinson Journal.
As a kind of paradigm for understanding Douglass’s appropriation of white racist logos, I would like to use Webster’s 1825 Spelling Book as the standard with which and against which Douglass educates himself. Douglass uses young Thomas’s copybook on Monday afternoons when Mrs. Auld goes to class meeting. The copybook scene is provocative. The entire household is away, probably at their learning activities, while Douglass learns at home. Douglass relates that, “by this time, my little Master Thomas had gone to school, and learned how to write, and had written over a number of copybooks,” which indicates in a general sense the white boy’s age and development, but probably also indicates that he is away at his studies. Mrs. Auld is definitely away at her studies: “My mistress used to go to class meeting at the Wilk Street meetinghouse every Monday afternoon, and leave me to take care of the house.” While they are away, he is at the domestic core of the family, in the house, in secret, at his own studies: “I then commenced and continued copying the Italics in Webster’s Spelling Book, until I could make them all without looking on the book” (87).

Douglass is ten, eleven, or twelve when he commences his copying, so that, if Douglass was born in 1818, the year is 1828, 1829, or 1830. At about this same time, he claims that he was “now about twelve years old” (83), when he talks with the urchins near the shipyard. At another point Douglass claims of the same period that he was “now between ten and eleven years old” (89). In any case, the year of Douglass’s copy-writing is sometime between 1828 and 1830. As his little master Thomas had apparently used the Webster’s Spelling Book a year or a few years earlier, it is reasonable to suggest that Douglass’s copybook may be the 1825 version, The American Spelling Book; containing The Rudiments of the English Language for the Use of Schools in the United States.

The 1825 Spelling Book abounds with lessons in conduct and rules of comportment. Notable among these are the rules that dictate what behavior characterizes the good child. For instance, in rule XII, Douglass might have found the injunction: “Tell no tales; call no ill names; you must not lie, nor swear, nor cheat, nor steal.” Needless to say, such an injunction would have exposed for him a terrible discrepancy between language and actions of the dominating culture. Perhaps equally painful for Douglass would have been this injunction, also under section XII: “Be a good child; mind your book; love your school, and strive to learn.” No child ever strove to learn harder than the young Frederick Douglass, and yet he was informed again and again that the signifier “good” carried for him the signification “bad,” that an inch was an ell. Yet another section, section XIII, commands that “a good child . . . will be good at home, and ask to read his book . . . “ (45). In Douglass’s case, he could only be “good” at home, in secret, alone and subversive; only then could he ask to read his book.

Another part of the spelling book that might have caught Douglass’s attention was a fable about justice called “The Partial Judge.” “The Partial Judge” is about reparation for livestock but it is even more acutely concerned with issues of ownership and justice. A perusal of the fable calls attention to the italicization of the pronouns your and my to emphasize the question of ownership. Two men argue about reimbursement for an ox that was killed; the conundrum turns on perspective. The first farmer tries to lure his neighbor lawyer into positing a universal standard of justice. The lawyer is tricked into doing so but, upon finding the specifics of ownership (i.e., that he himself stands to lose), overturns his initial assessment by positing a relative justice based on if (the other italicized word—italicized twice). His second type of justice turns on the particulars of point of view, a
point of view that depends upon ownership. Such an italic—this "it"—gives new meaning to Douglass's relaying that he "commenced and continued copying the Italics in Webster's Spelling Book, until I could make them all without looking on the book." He learns so well the skewed signifiers of a culture, the ironies contained in the italics, that he no longer needs to look but has them memorized.

Douglass couldn't have helped but notice the tale "The Partial Judge," especially when his future was so often more cruelly uncertain than that of livestock. He reports after his residence in Baltimore that he and other slaves were evaluated as property: "Our fate for life was now to be decided. We had no more voice in that decision than the brutes among whom we were ranked" (90). His fate is often decided upon such slippery and relative standards of ownership as the lawyer's in the spelling book fable.

At this point I would like to back up to look at Douglass's entry into the play of signifiers where it first begins, directly before his copybook experience. We see this play of signifiers most trenchantly in Chapters VI and VII of the narrative, and perhaps most notably with the example of the word abolition. Douglass is attracted to the signifier in a Lacanian kind of way: He had always heard it "used in such connections as to make it an interesting word to me" (85); that is to say, the signifier abolition highlights interrelations-Also with the word abolition, we see that the accepted authority for the dominating (written) discourse can have no meaning for Douglass. He must find his own signified for the signifier. The accepted authority for written discourse is of course the dictionary, but there Douglass learns that abolition means "the act of abolishing," a definition which gives him "little or no help" (85).

If Ralph Waldo Emerson sees language as transitive and vehicular, then we can see that, in the case of Douglass's abolition, conventional language fails to attain a vehicular quality; i.e., it gets him nowhere. Using white, racist authorities, Douglass of necessity stalls. We might say that the dictionary, in Emersonian terms, is a "dead horse," or fails to be vehicular. Douglass must turn to his own world of connections and meanings in order to define abolition; as Emerson in "The American Scholar" exhorts, "Life is our dictionary" (71). Part of Douglass's project, surely, is to use life as a dictionary, but what he must do is more subversive than that. The life he turns to offers discomfiting and disturbing signifieds to white signifiers. The only way for him to understand a signifier such as abolition is to decompose—or deconstruct—it.

Another example of how signification systems intrude upon one another is found in the famous scene in which Mr. Auld reproves his wife for attempting to teach Douglass to read. This scene demonstrates the relativity of the words inch and ell, for when Mr. Auld catches Mrs. Auld trying to teach Douglass the "A, B, C," he reproaches her by saying,

"If you give a nigger an inch, he will take an ell. A nigger should know nothing but to obey his master—to do as he is told to do." (78)

As Douglass early on broaches the world of white signification he finds that, for the slaveowning culture, an inch becomes an ell; ell operates as a skewed, paranoiac signification for inch. With this skewering, Douglass begins to understand the fractured correspondence between signifier and signified, in the way that it must be fractured for any marginal reader. He writes: "These words sank deep into my heart, stirred up sentiments within that lay slumbering, and called into existence an entirely new train of thought." And this new train is vehicular language with a vengeance: "From that moment, I understood the path-
way from slavery to freedom” (78). As a corollary he also understands the disjunctive nature of language. Whereas Mr. Auld had wrenched  

ell as a signified for inch, Douglass now understands his own signification as a kind of wrenching; his feelings of opposition designate the (black) signifieds for (white) signifiers:4

What he [Auld] most dreaded, that I most desired. 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 . . . . (79)

The new system of signification repositions Douglass as speaking subject.

Curiously enough, we can find a definition of ell in the 1825 Spelling Book. Under “Useful Lessons,” we find a series of measurements used primarily for commerce, in exacting the precise measurements used in determining ownership. Specifically, “Useful Lessons” offers this definition of ell: “In cloth measure, two inches and a fifth make a nail—four nails, one quarter of a yard—thirty-six inches or three feet make a yard—three quarters of a yard make an ell Flemish—and five quarters make an English ell” (113). Again we encounter a highly relative perspective, a slippery signification that Douglass would have encountered in broaching the written white world of the nineteenth century. The word ell has different signifieds in different cultures—one for the Flemish and one for the English. No American standard is given. But inexorably, the paragraph moves from inch to ell, similar to the “useful” lesson Mr. Auld unwittingly taught Frederick Douglass.

The word ell may in fact indicate a giant dislocation in the system of signifiers that Douglass enters, in that the letter L may also be implied. If Douglass had learned from Mrs. Auld the letters A and B, then he would need the letter L as the next consonant on the way to spelling the word abolition.5

The ordering of the letters A, B, and L in the crucial signifier abolition may be coincidence, but it is probably not a coincidence that Douglass picks up his aborted education with the letter L written on the side of timber intended for the construction of ships.

The L so written is intended to indicate “larboard,” but for Douglass the L is a continuation of the “A, B, C” lesson that had been interrupted by Mr. Auld. He learns the letter S (for “starboard”) this way, too, and also F (“forward”) and A (“aft”).6 Thus, possibly his most valuable education in reading and writing occurs on the waterfront.7 He also learns by challenging the white boys in the neighborhood, by asserting that he knows more letters than they.8 By challenging the boys’ culture he learns a fragmented letters—out of order, and bit by bit. This disordered alphabet demonstrates aptly the positioning of a marginalized speaking subject in the economy of signifiers.

Soon enough, however, by his own writing, he will reposition (and de- position) many a reading subject and U. S. writer after him, and before him, too. No sooner does Douglass learn to read these letters than he begins to write them, using the materials at hand as paper: “During this time, my copy-book was the board fence, brick wall, and pavement: my pen and ink was a lump of chalk” (87). Life is not only his dictionary but his chalkboard, too.

With this we return to the primal scene of Douglass’s copybook writing to portray Douglass as a force of différence in United States literature. Again, when no one is home he uses young Thomas’s copybook to practice his own letters: “When left thus [alone], I used to spend the time in writing in the spaces left in Master Thomas’s copy-book, copying what he had written” (87). Whereas Thomas needed to write and rewrite, Douglass needed to write and rewrite alongside
defines the center, and as Douglass becomes vectored within this system of signification, so do all the other speaking subjects become revected with relation to him. That is to say, Douglass’s perception of the deferral of meaning impinges upon all of United States literature. His dismantling of the system of signifiers becomes inevitable.

Dismantled language, or deconstruction, is the only means by which Frederick Douglass can participate in the play of signifiers of the dominant culture. Actually, it’s the only means for anyone to navigate within the bumper-car play of signifiers, but Douglass’s position within this play is doubly bombarded. Already operative within one language system (the language of slavery that can sing blues songs), Douglass broaches another system of language. Douglass is in the position of an other, différence (difference), learning the otherness of the signifier, différence (deferment). Hence, he stands in a position to deconstruct doubly the oppressive language system. This is where Douglass has something to say to Jacques Lacan, where he can position Lacan, anachronistically—and I think language can work that way, atemporally—through the play of signifiers. Or, more precisely, Douglass positions Lacan through the play of Douglass’s signifiers, which place and replace Lacan’s signifiers.

This play and replay can describe the inadequacy of white writing to the marginalized person; for instance, there is no “authentic record” documenting the fact of Douglass’s birth. Not only does Douglass not know his age but neither do most slaves. A whole segment of the population is positioned outside the signifying circle of the dominating culture: “I do not remember to have ever met a slave who could tell of his birthday” (47), Douglass informs us. The system of

the already written. Douglass in actuality writes in the gaps of white, racist culture. His enforced marginalization by a paternalistic, logocentric power structure shows in that he has to write, literally, in the margins of the copybook. It is a palimpsest of a particular kind; the black slave pens over the white spaces. We can see emphatically in this scene Douglass’s entry into the logos of a system of signifiers, and the way in which it positions him in that system, before he will, in time, reposition it.

He writes necessarily from the gaps, in the margins. It is a problematic moment, one of edgy triumph. Douglass captures the moment’s complexity in the final sentence of Chapter VII: “Thus, after a long, tedious effort for years, I finally succeeded in learning how to write” (87). The statement circles around from Douglass’s claim, cited earlier, after talking with the dock workers at Mr. Waters’ wharf: “Meanwhile, I would learn to write” (86). We register the accomplishment, but we also register the flatness and partial exhaustion of the statement. The tedium of his efforts may be the lasting impression. The moment is problematic in terms of cultural identity, too. Douglass has made his first incursions into white written language. We might pose Gates’s question here again as the controlling consideration: “Whose language?” Baker also posits the problem eloquently:

The voice of the unwritten self, once it is subjected to the linguistic codes, literary conventions, and audience expectations of a literate population, is perhaps never again the authentic voice of black American slavery. It is, rather, the voice of a self transformed by an autobiographical act into a sharer in the general public discourse about slavery. (43)

It is true that Douglass has entered a system of signifiers that will vector him differently from now on. He can never be positioned as speaking subject as he was before, and that is a loss.9 But it is also true that as much as the center defines the margins, the margins

FREDERICK DOUGLASS’S POSITIONING OF LANGUAGE

653
signification of white writing is a closed system. Eventually, Douglass’s writing will crack open that system, and by the acceleration of signification will dictate a new economy of signifiers. By contrast, the white writing at the time has a less slippery system of signifiers, and is more stable. Ralph Waldo Emerson, for example, sees language as vehicular—efficient, functional, perhaps even romantic. (I do not mean to say that United States Anglo-literature was stagnating—far from it—but rather that the dominant literature had a set of signifiers and signifieds that they perceived to be more exactly correlating, relatively speaking, than Douglass, by necessity, did.) Douglass will shake language with his entry into written signification.

Douglass shows the divergence of language systems in his discussion of slave songs. These songs comprise the quintessential marginalized expression, a separate economy from the dominant culture’s economy of language. White people hear the songs as joyful when they are actually sorrowful. White people can’t “read” the songs; they would miss the signified altogether. Douglass, from deep “within the circle,” couldn’t fully appreciate until later the desolation of those “rude and apparently incoherent songs,” but still was always “filled with ineffable sadness” and a depression of spirits upon hearing them. Douglass’s project, like that of Ralph Ellison and many African American writers after Douglass, is to effect the collision of the economies of signification. He enlivens the word bank. His task becomes one of recording, and effecting, the colliding of languages.

That Douglass witnesses the collision of language systems is clear enough, again in the first few pages. He can report both the “hearing of those wild notes” of the slave songs, and the “recurrence to those songs, even now . . . while I am writing” (58). He feels sadness at the utterance within the circle of his originating culture even as he uses the logos of the other to remember and record it. Again, he perceives the recurrence “while I am writing”: Douglass apprehends emotion while writing, finds a concurrence of the past and present in language, as his two language systems encroach upon each other. He is able, while he is writing, to conjoint the world of slave songs and text, of marginalized and centri-fied, oral and written cultures.

At the end of the section on songs, Douglass expresses his astonishment at finding “persons who could speak of the singing, among slaves, as evidence of their contentment and happiness” (58). Clearly, he addresses a white audience here. I think it is significant that Douglass was writing for members of both cultures. Certainly he writes in the tradition of the slave narrative and is aware that other African Americans will read him. He also places himself, however, not within, but adjacent to and with incursions into, white writing. He wants to jog it, to exist next to it, to upset it and let the different signifying systems catch at each other. From the margin, Douglass orients and eventually discomposes the center. Or rather, the activity of the signifier positions Douglass as a speaking subject within the dismantling. In doing so, the signifier must reposition previous (mostly white) speaking subjects, and create new configurations in the dialogue.

I think, too, that Douglass writes with his pen in the margin but that the pen came from the body, somewhat in the same way that women write the body. I wouldn’t posit an exact écriture féminine for Frederick Douglass, because I don’t think that Douglass’s project is one of the semiotic realm (as opposed to the symbolic realm determined by the “Name of the Father”). These are the categories of Julia Kristeva, arguing from Lacan, who suggests as part of the semiotic the chora, that unarticulable arena of drives associated with the maternal body that lies beyond language, and manifests in syntax and sound waves rather than signification. I would claim the
chora for very few men. Whitman, for example, exhibits, I think, feminine jouissance and sometimes almost skirts the Name of the Father, which is of the symbolic mode. Frederick Douglass doesn’t want to skirt the Name of the Father, but he does, laudably, want to skirt the Name of the White Father, or at least to vex it highly. He does this by drawing attention to his entry into one web of signifiers from another web, by dramatizing his shift from “within the circle” to his act of writing in the margins.

But again the pen that scribes the gaps is, if not of the body as in écriture féminine, then from the body. In one sense, Douglass would have understood labor in the most obvious way as work, but also in the powerful, more personal, feminine way as what the body goes through to give birth to what is one’s own, or should be one’s own. In other words, labor is not only work, but also that activity that creates the newborn exclusively through the exertions of one’s own body. Referring once more to Webster’s Spelling Book, I would like to point out a section entitled “Lessons on Familiar Subjects.” In this section, almost pre-Whitmanian in its ecstatic listing of the duties of working people, we find first and foremost the description of the farmer who “reaps the fruit of his labor” (155). The section begins with a claim of universality by using the word all: “All mankind live on the fruits of the earth—” (154). It continues with the highly masculine vocabulary of tilling, plowing, and harrowing, and describes in exquisite detail the difficult work of husbandry. The activities would have been activities with which Douglass, even at the young age of ten or eleven or twelve, would have been familiar from his rural childhood. Certainly the passage would have meant more to him than it would have for the urban Thomas. The moral is clear: Work is hard but the result is worth the effort:

With what joy does the farmer gather his crops, of the former and latter harvest!—He toils indeed but he reaps the fruit of his labor in peace—he fills his granary in summer, and in autumn presents a thank-offering to God for his bounty. (155)

Of course the lesson presents a moral expressly unavailable to the slave Frederick Douglass, for the fruits of his labor were not his. He didn’t own his body or his body’s labor.

But the pain of his body is linked to his writing, again in a way that links him with some powerful women writers, also marginalized because of the perceived otherness of their bodies. For me the most memorable sentence among countless memorable sentences of Douglass’s Narrative occurs in another scene depicting him while he is writing. Douglass suggests this some pages after his passage explaining what occurs for him “while I am writing”: the conflation of slave songs that recur along with the act of writing that he has appropriated from Caucacentric culture. This collision of signification systems is the quintessential Douglass while he is writing. Nearly all of the narrative recounts past events; not many times during the narrative do we see Douglass at work while writing, in the present, with pen in hand. Hence, the “while I am writing” passages carry particular interest, and show him at his work. This second while-I-am-writing moment follows: “My feet have been so cracked with the frost, that the pen with which I am writing might be laid in the gashes” (72). This is an extraordinarily moving sentence; it shows Douglass’s hideous suffering as well as his remarkable relationship with language. That is, he recurs to originating black slave signification—the painful language of the body—as he writes within a white signifying system; he must always hold both systems of signification simultaneously. The dual awareness, the ability to be located by two signification systems at once, is what makes Douglass so crucial an American writer.
I close my examination of Douglass’s use of language by turning from the specific considerations of Webster’s Spelling Book and the word *ell* to a more general discussion of his usage of proper names. I will also note some of the bridges we can discern between Douglass’s usage and twentieth-century black usages of names, such as those in the writing of Ralph Ellison. By moving into the twentieth century we can see how some of the repositionings of language have already occurred, given Douglass’s initial placements within the signifying web.

One of the ways in which Douglass evidences a pronounced double dismantling of language is in the assignation of proper names. Many critics have noticed in Douglass’s *Narrative* the use of signifying names, such as the cruel Gore; Freeland, on whose land Douglass plots an escape to freedom; and Covey, which sounds appropriately covert. Douglass himself draws attention to the aptness of the names; Mr. Severe, for example, was “rightly named” (55). The names are stark, almost signposts.14 Indeed, such naming seems a convention for the slave narrative and black literature after it. The names of people in Olaudah Equiano’s narrative sound almost archetypal: Baker, King, Queen, Farmer. (The names may be real and hence coincidental-seeming, but the author at the very least chooses the material to bring into the narrative.) Harriet Jacobs clearly creates names for her characters, as for instance the evil Dr. Flint. Ralph Ellison in the twentieth century will ritualize such naming tactics, as for example in the naming of Bledsoe, Emerson, Rinehart, and many others. Needless to say, black authors are not the only writers to give such signal names to characters; countless white writers, like Charles Dickens, have lavished such names on their characters, but perhaps without quite the impact that black writers effect in designating with their characters’ names conscious collisions in signifying systems.

The way in which black authors name themselves forms an even more complex act than the naming of other characters. Ralph Ellison suggests that “it is through our names that we first place ourselves in the world” (151). Further, one’s name becomes the way in which one negotiates oneself in the written world. The existence of multiple names for the self echoes the complexity of that negotiation for the black writer. Olaudah Equiano negotiates the world through the names of Michael, Jacob, and Gustavus. The character of Janie in *Their Eyes Were Watching God* agglomerates the name Janie Mae Crawford Killics Starks Woods; a black character, part of the mutability of her name inheres in being female as well. Ralph Ellison discusses naming in the folk character Tar Baby:

> The [Tar Baby], in his silent way, holds on, demanding that we perceive the necessity of calling him by his true name as the price of our freedom. It is unfortunate that he has so many, many “true names”—all spelling chaos . . . . (151)

Frederick Douglass, like Tar Baby, has many, many names, moving from Frederick Augustus Washington Bailey to Frederick Bailey to Stanley to Frederick Johnson and finally to Frederick Douglass. His multiplicity of names demonstrates the difficulty of negotiating a racist logos. His first name, Frederick Bailey, derives from the last name of his mother, “daughter of Isaac and Betsey Bailey, both colored, and quite dark” (47). In this Douglass inherits his mother’s name and escapes, at least directly, the white patronymic, though he probably does not escape altogether, for more than likely his grandparents were so named. Ellison writes of this struggle as it affects twentieth-century writers: “And when we are reminded so constantly that we bear, as Negroes, names originally possessed by those who owned our enslaved grandparents, we are apt, especially if we are potential writers, to be more than ordinarily concerned with the veiled and mysterious events,
the fusions of blood, the furtive couplings, the business transactions, the violations of faith and loyalty, the assaults; yes, and the unrecognized and unrecognizable loves through which our names were handed down unto us” (151). Douglass finds his way, at least partially, through such a labyrinth, by renaming himself. Interestingly, both Douglass and Ralph Waldo Ellison have names that are literary constructs, and both were named by others—Ellison by his father and Douglass by Mr. Johnson in New York. Johnson names Douglass after a character in Sir Walter Scott’s “Lady of the Lake.” Constanzo notes of Douglass’s name that the “strong, rebellious nobleman James of Douglas is a principal character in Sir Walter Scott’s famous narrative poem” (68).

All speaking subjects, according to Lacan, enter a preexisting system of signifiers, but we see it more clearly and more politically—and more excruciatingly—with Frederick Douglass. All of us occupy a subject position identified by the vicissitudinous workings of language rather than owning a unified subjectivity in the conventional sense. We are positioned by our very names; Douglass, by dint of “so many, many” names is positioned and repositioned, more than those with one given and unchanged patronymic at the center of society.

To acquire a name is to position and determine the subject within his or her language system. That’s the reason that the subplot of naming holds such great weight in Douglass’s narrative, and why naming constitutes such furious activity. With each name he is variously fixed within language and, further, is made vulnerable to changing vectorings by signification. The progression from Frederick Augustus Washington Bailey to Frederick Douglass describes various stops along the way of the many positionings of Douglass as speaking subject. He finally is constructed as a highly literary complex of signifiers. We might describe his quest for freedom as comitant with the radical and highly capricious plot of the bombardment of the signifier. Douglass is placed as speaking subject and replaced, displaced as speaking subject and placed again. This displacement, of course, displaces the reader, too, as the narrative progresses.

And the placing and replacing and displacing continue to the very end. The last two words of the narrative are “Frederick Douglass.” A name, usually the first words associated with one’s life, are the final words for the narrative. James Olney notices that Douglass begins and ends the narrative with himself. The title includes the words, “Written by Himself,” and the ending, “I subscribe myself.” Olney claims that the phrase Written by Himself constitutes “an act of linguistic assertion and aggression, in the language and the literary mode of the oppressor, and it is doubly so: it is explicitly an act of assertion and aggression against the slaveholders who tried to prevent the slave’s ever learning to read and write; and it is implicitly an act of assertion and aggression against abolitionists who 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” (5). In addition, the phrase that ends the narrative, “I subscribe myself, / Frederick Douglass,” occurs in an appendix that Douglass added. Robert Stepto discusses the convention of prefaces and appendices in slave narratives, and lauds Douglass’s appendix as containing Douglass’s own views rather than operating as a vehicle for a white abolitionist. Stepto asserts that “Douglass’ narrative thus offers what is unquestionably our best portrait in Afro-American letters of the requisite act of assuming authorial control” (26). The appendix and the last phrase of the appendix demonstrate that Frederick Douglass, once a marginalized person, now writing, presses upon the center.

His language, specifically, shows this, too: “I subscribe myself, /
Frederick Douglass.” The ironic, punning gesture of “sub-scribe” indicates his name beneath as well as his once marginal positioning within the logoscentric system of signifiers. He shows with this pun, clearly, that he has become actively positioned.\(^{15}\) He has the last word; he is the last word. The last word, in fact, is his word, his act of naming himself while he is writing. No system of signifiers, however, is ever closed or complete; it is always fluxing, growing. It can only be the last word at any given moment that can establish the chain of signification that has occurred previously. In the given moment of the narrative, the final signifier, “Douglass,” works to create the illusion of establishing the chain that has gone before. Douglass gives us the name we must accept in order to read all of the foregoing.

Notes

1. In “The Poet,” Emerson states that “…all symbols are fluxional; all language is vehicular and transitive, and is good, as ferries and horses are, for conveyance, not as farms and houses are, for homestead” (237). (Interestingly, Emerson also claims that some children see priests at a distance as dead horses [238].) I think Douglass challenges Emerson’s notion of vehicular language, because the relationship of the signifier to signified is so profound in Douglass. Certainly language moves for Douglass, as it does for Emerson. It does at least that. But it is not nearly so mannerly or predictable, of necessity. Perhaps for Emerson the path from the signifier to the signified is more reliable than for Douglass, because for him the path is hazardous, breakneck, proliferating. The signified is never a bullseye for anyone, but perhaps for members of minority groups it is more rapidly deferred.

2. It is tempting upon a first reading to see Frederick Douglass as a prime exemplar of Ralph Waldo Emerson’s American Scholar. In “The American Scholar,” Emerson urges “creative reading” (69) as well as creative writing, and surely Douglass’s reading of “The Cumbrian Orator” was never used in a more Emersonian way; that is, Douglass reads for inspiration. Emerson also says that reading feels better than his birthday (226). In one way, reading is Douglass’s birthday, for reading gives birth to the nascent concept of himself as a free man. However, it is too easy to see Douglass as the true American Scholar. Especially when we come to Emerson’s notion of action, Emerson falls short of Douglass. Douglass exchanges bread for reading lessons, a material exigency Emerson would have misunderstood.

3. Another wrenched signifier/signified relationship occurs with the concept of freedom. At one point in the narrative, freedom becomes the signified to almost any signifier: “Freedom now appeared, to disappear no more forever. It was heard in every sound, and seen in every thing. It was ever present to torment me with a sense of my wretched condition. I saw nothing without seeing it, I heard nothing without hearing it, and felt nothing without feeling it. It looked from every star, it smiled in every calm, breathed in every wind, and moved in every storm” (85). Freedom becomes an anarchic correlation to every event, action, and sound in Douglass’s life. It is a broad-status signification, and it is easy to see how it could torment him.

4. Certainly Gates’s discussion of binary oppositions in *Figures in Black* strongly influences my perception of Douglass’s relation to signification.

5. The *L* may also show how much further down the alphabet a slave can get, if he is only given the A, B, and C. *El* may also, possibly, connote an elevated position. Both of these possibilities would be circumstances the slaveholding Mr. Auld would fear as the result of giving “an inch.” As an aside of complete but perhaps interesting coincidence, the “*el*” definition occurs on the page opposite some of the “*L*” word formations Douglass might have practiced writing: “isle (*Written*) / *ile* (Pronounced); *isl* and (*Written*) / *ile* and (Pronounced); bel *les* let tres (*Written*) / bel let *ter* (Pronounced)” (112). They all would have been provocative words, one would think, for Douglass.

6. The word *starboard* might, additionally, be a loaded word for a slave with strong connections to the north star, a symbol of and guidance to freedom. The word might have been one that Douglass, in constructing his narrative, would have remembered as a particularly vibrant word and one he might have chosen as a detail to include in constructing his story. A basic viewpoint of this essay is that autobiography, while referring to an actual life, is also a highly constructed work of art that evidences careful choices in the use of material.

7. As an aside, water and ships, especially, work as controlling metaphors in much of the narrative. Figuring importantly in Douglass’s life are the sloop *Sally Lloyd* (53), setting sail from Colonel Lloyd’s

658  AFRICAN AMERICAN REVIEW
plantation (74), sailing from Baltimore in the sloop Amanda (94), the famous soliloquy to the sails on the Chesapeake (106-07), the fine ships of New Bedford (148), and Douglass's first employment on a sloop (150). Douglass, too, escapes to freedom disguised as a seaman.

8. One of the finest aspects of Chapters VI and VII is the demonstration of the dynamics of power as it works in terms of race, but also in terms of gender, class, and age. Mrs. Auld, probably by dint of gender, is at least initially more receptive to accepting Douglass; the Irish dockworkers at Mr. Waters's wharf are more receptive because of class; and the boys are more so because of both class and age.

9. Andrews notices Douglass's deconstruction of "The Columbian Orator" in his observations, as follows: "These are terrible revelations for the young black who learns to read slavery aright. Let him discover the a poria, or logical impulses, that belie the privileging of paternalistic and racist powers over him, and he will, in effect, deconstruct the authoritarian ideology that imprisons him. But do not expect that the light shed on his condition will be a great comfort to him" (225).

10. Stuckey appreciates Douglass as an "important theorist of black culture," especially as pertains to music, and observes that his "theories are rooted in economic and political oppression" (40).

11. Angelo Costanzo notes, "Since its publication in 1845, Douglass' work has contributed to the formation of black pride. His narrative has been known and widely read by black writers who have received inspiration from its courageous spirit and have used its literary form as a model for their own work" (120).

12. To envision this intersubjectivity we might take Jacques Lacan's discussion of "The Purloined Letter," for example. The letter, or signifier, positions the king, queen, and the minister, then repositions them as the queen, minister, and Dupin. These intersubjectivities are determined by the signifier.

13. As a white reader, I am positioned in a particular pattern with relation to the various texts, black and white, as they interact. I'm interested in seeing how Douglass positions Lacan. I see as part of my job the description of how I experience my location as a reader, how the intersubjectivities defined by the movements of the signifier affect my sense of where I am, particularly reader, exist in the play of language. I am vigilant about the dangers of being in the position of a white critic looking at a black text. Michael Awkward posits this potential danger as follows: "... if gender and race as we have traditionally perceived them are both by and large socially constructed, then whiteness as dominant position in the Western racial hierarchy is potentially as formidable an obstacle to interpretive competence vis-à-vis black (con)texts as maleness is to persuasive feminist exegesis" (582). I hope that my reading is clear as one reading from a particular position within the intersubjectivities that the system of signifiers dictates; other critics occupy other positions within that same system, and our use of a system of signification locates us in relation to one another. As one particular perspective it seems a worthwhile perspective to pursue.

Also, along with Juliet Mitchell, Julia Kristeva, and other feminist critics, I do not see Lacan's view of language as prescriptive but rather descriptive of the interrelationalities that language dictates. In some ways, that is where Douglass is most useful, and where he can read Lacan. Douglass shows us exactly where language is most slippery and inadequate, and in so doing changes the signifier-to-signified quotient forever. Or, technically, the signifiers (he uses) change his (marginalized) position within the language construct.

14. Unlike with other signifiers Douglass encounters, which necessitate endless detours of meaning, the names of the narrative (excepting Douglass's own name) show a more exact correspondence. Douglass forms his own kind of dictionary with these names, a marginal lexicon with more adequate signifying relationships that those to be found in the dominant culture dictionary. These more directly corresponding significations highlight, in some ways, the more wrenched correlations. Importantly, though, these definitions appear to be inaccessible to members of white culture. Without Douglass to guide white reading, such exact correspondences are missed because of cultural blindness. The severity of Mr. Severe, in other words, seemed as misunderstood by members of white culture as "abolition" was confusing to Douglass at first.

Another interesting and opprobrious name is "Lloyd's Ned," who in the act of naming has had his identity relegated to slavery unequivocally. It is nearly insufferable to think that Transcendentalism with its ideas of self-reliance could flourish at the same time that such naming, that precluded self-reliance altogether, could also exist.

It is worth pointing out in addition that Douglass chooses not to name the white city boys who help him learn to read. The urchins remain unsignified. Douglass tries to leave some of his characters out of the signifying chain, as a way of protecting them.

15. This is how Douglass reads Lacan. The sign is not a welding of signifier and signified but rather a kind of spark between the two fields. This is true for any speaking subject. A speaking subject is vectored by a system of relations, then revectored in each speaking moment s/he hits upon those.
moments of ignition or catch. One of the most fascinating elements of Douglass’s narrative is the way we see these moments change to new moments. The inexorable deferment of meaning occurs again and again. Douglass’ “I” is vectored by signifier and signified, and the positioning changes rapidly and continuously—as it does for any speaking subject. But Douglass’s Lacan can show us that vectoring as it happens for a speaking subject who is marginalized within the system of language relationalities, and who incurs upon the center.

Works Cited


