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Construction and Deconstruction of an Icon:

*Frederick Douglass's Self-Representation
and Contemporary Revisions of His Persona*

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*La sconfitta è un'eleganza
per l'ipocrisia di chi si arrende in partenza.*

Subsonica, *L'Ultima Risposta*

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INTRODUCTION

During the two years of my postgraduate University course I have focused in particular on contemporary authors writing in English, in order to explore how the literary and historical traditions of English-speaking countries influence today's artistic fields, especially literature and filmmaking.

One of the trends that is to be found in contemporary American literature and in motion picture industry is the revision of historical events and icons. Contemporary artists are indeed rereading and reinterpreting canonical and crystallized narrations of the past, so as to let forgotten aspects and the untold stories of those who were silenced by history emerge. However, in many cases these authors have to resort to their imagination to fill the gaps in the archives in order to provide side stories to the conventional and accepted narration of history. In their revisions, they are influenced not only by their heterogeneous roots and heritage, but also by recently developed interpretative paradigms, such as gender theories, so they can provide an innovative and unique perspective on the past. Moreover, many of these contemporary writers and directors also adopt innovative stylistic approaches in their narration, which allow them to achieve original and unusual outcomes.

I have grown more and more interested in this topic, to such an extent that I have decided to end my academic experience with a dissertation on the recent approach adopted by contemporary authors to one of the most prominent black spokesmen of all times: Frederick Douglass.

Born in Captain Anthony's plantation in Talbot County (Maryland) in 1818, Frederick Douglass remained a slave for 20 years before succeeding in freeing himself from bondage. He spent part of his childhood as a house slave in Baltimore,

where he covertly learnt to read and to write. After 7 years, he was sent back to Maryland, where Douglass experienced the harshest conditions of slavery. Here, he was employed in plantation agriculture, a work that completely exhausted and broke him in body and soul. Indeed, working in the fields meant for Douglass to suffer through the worst time in his life, for he experienced his master's meanness and cruelty. After six months of hard work and beatings, Douglass eventually succeeded in reacting thanks to his towering physical appearance and strong will: he fought back and nobody dared to whip him again. The elation he felt after the rebellion pushed him to plan his escape: for the first time, he felt free from the psychological oppression he had had to endure up to that moment and this gave him the strength to escape on 3rd September 1838. When he reached New York, he changed his name in Frederick Douglass¹ – for his name was Frederick Bailey – and moved with his wife Anna Murray to New Bedford (Massachusetts), where he started his career of winsome orator for the abolitionist propaganda. Thanks to the friendship with the abolitionist William Lloyd Garrison², who convinced Douglass to take part as lecturer in conferences organized by the antislavery movement, Douglass became a celebrity: along with holding lectures, he started to write autobiographies and became the spokesman of those who had suffered and – in particular – of those who were still suffering enslavement. Thanks to his testimony and his oratorical skills, Douglass brought to light the inhumanity of slavery that blacks were facing every day and his words became a beacon of hope for the whole black community, which

¹ As soon as he reached New York, Douglass changed his last name in “Frederick Johnson”, but when he moved to New Bedford, there were too many Johnsons, so he decided to adopt a new surname. One of his friends was reading Walter Scott's *The Lady of the Lake* and suggested him to use “Douglass”, i.e. the family name of one of the protagonists.

² Garrison was the director of the weekly publication *The Liberator*, one of the most famous papers which advocated the abolition of slavery.

considered him a hero. Moreover, Frederick Douglass sat for photography sessions, so as to respond to the stereotyped representations of blackness which permeated the 19th-century American society. Douglass indeed understood the potentiality of photography as a fundamental tool for racial uplift and his portraits emerge as a watershed in the representation of blackness in the US. Douglass's legacy affected indeed later generations of blacks: his first autobiography *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, an American Slave* – published in 1845 – became the fundamental text which the following works of African-American male writers would rest on, and his dignified self-representation massively contributed to change the notion of blackness. The respectable representation that Douglass built for himself through his works and in particular through his photographs has crystallized over time. The black leader has indeed become an icon for the African-American community and the patriarchal and rational self-representation he adopts in the last years of his life has also been accepted by American society as a whole.

Douglass is such an important cornerstone in the American history that contemporary writers are still dealing with his figure. However, they adopt a different perspective and do not conform to previous canonical representations of Douglass, which did not dare to question his prominence and greatness and presented the black leader as a faultless and irreprehensible man. Nowadays, fiction writers are changing direction: today, Douglass appears in revisions or ironic versions of his iconicity, in which contemporary writers play with his character according to different degrees.

Before analyzing contemporary writers' revisions of Douglass's iconic figure, it is important to contextualize Douglass's work in the social and cultural history of

19th-century US. For this reason, I have decided to divide my dissertation into two parts: the first section traces the ways in which Douglass was able to emerge as a spokesman of the black community in a racist society, whereas the second focuses on Douglass's afterlife and the contemporary revisions of his iconicity.

Starting with a general overview of the 19th-century American society, in the first chapter I analyze Douglass's life writing, which includes not only his written texts – such as his *Narrative*, his fiction and his discourses – but also his photographs: Douglass indeed used both writing and photography to convey his ideas, to shape his image as a leader and to establish himself as a respectable and dignified subject.

The second part jumps forward to the 21st century and explores how contemporary writers approach Frederick Douglass's iconicity. Both the second and the third chapter of my dissertation focus on revisions of Douglass's persona, but they adopt two different perspectives. Indeed, in the second chapter I analyze the novels of two male writers – Colum McCann's *TransAtlantic* and James McBride's *The Good Lord Bird* – highlighting their opposite approach to such a great American icon. McCann – a white Irish author – does not dare to revolutionize Douglass's self-representation, he just implicitly questions Douglass's icon by letting his minor flaws emerge. On the contrary, McBride – as an African-American writer – explicitly pokes fun at the black leader by means of a satirical narration and presents him as a verbose drunken sexist man, a description which completely clashes with Douglass's self-representation.

The third chapter questions Frederick Douglass's integrity from a female point of view. Jewell Parker Rhodes's *Douglass' Women* focuses on the black leader's

sentimental life and casts a shadow on him as a man. The African-American female writer reports the voices of Douglass's black wife Anna Murray and of his white mistress Otilie Assing, who had been almost completely erased in Douglass's autobiographies and in later novels dealing with the black leader. For the first time, Rhodes gives them back the voices they had been deprived of: thanks to *Douglass' Women*, Anna's and Otilie's side stories can be shared with the public, who is now aware of untold aspects of Douglass's life and personality.

The revisions I have taken into account mark a watershed in the representation and in the public reception of Frederick Douglass, because they present the African-American leader in an unusual manner. However, as my dissertation tries to show, the revised representations provided by these authors do not aim at lessening Douglass's importance as black statesman as it may seem at first sight, but they rather complete the self-representation he built for himself.

PART I
Becoming an Icon

INTRODUCTION TO PART I

A Man and a Lion traveled together through the forest. They soon began to boast of their respective superiority to each other in strength and prowess. As they were disputing, they passed a statue carved in stone, which represented “a Lion strangled by a Man.” The traveler pointed to it and said: “See there! How strong we are, and how we prevail over even the king of beasts.” The Lion replied: “This statue was made by one of you men. If we Lions knew how to erect statues, you would see the Man placed under the paw of the Lion.” One story is good, till another is told. (Æsop 1871: 18)

The white abolitionist Wendell Phillips mentions this fable by Æsop in the letter which precedes the 1845 edition of the *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, an American Slave*. In the letter, Phillips reveals to Douglass that he is “glad the time has come when the ‘lions write history’” (Andrews and Gates 2000: 277), meaning that in those days blacks were finally acquiring a voice on the American literary scene. Indeed, blacks were starting to provide their own representation of slavery and blackness, which was a sort of revolution for 19th-century American society, since representation had always been controlled by white people. Indeed, some blacks were reacting to the fixed and mocking images of blackness provided by whites by juxtaposing their own idea of blackness. It was a sort of war of images through which blacks were trying to re-acquire the humanity and dignity they had been deprived of by whites almost two centuries before.

The following chapter focuses exactly on this issue: the visual struggle for blacks’ self-representation. After a general overview of the slavery experience and of the continued dehumanization that blacks had to endure, the rest of the chapter is dedicated to Frederick Douglass’s response to the stereotyped depictions of blackness the American society had been spreading for decades. This “war of images” started with Douglass and Sojourner Truth, an African-American

abolitionist and women's rights activist who helped to shape the cultural representations of blacks through her publications. Sold after her lectures so as to be remembered by the audience, Truth's *cartes de visite* portrayed her according to the 19th-century visual codes suitable for a middle-class white woman: "indeed, the knitting, book, and flowers are all the visual signifiers of nineteenth-century genteel and domestic femininity" (Rohrbach 2012: 88-89). This canonical representation clashes with her confrontational and defiant gaze, which conveys the black feminist's strong will, resolution and self-awareness.

The painstaking study of her stance and clothing allowed Sojourner Truth not only to free herself from the stereotyped representations provided by the white society, but also to become a recognizable emblem of the struggle for equal rights throughout her life and beyond. The white head wrap which she always wears in her portraits (**fig. 1**) became indeed her trademark and at the same time it highlighted Truth's connection with both slavery and her African past. Truth's desire to stick to her African origins and thus to an oral tradition is visible in her choice of exploiting



1. Frontispiece image of *Narrative of Sojourner Truth*, 1850. Documenting the American South, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill Libraries.

the 19th-century convention of frontispiece by inserting her portrait before starting the narrative of her life, so as to emphasize her presence and “declar[e] [her] commitment to orality and her radical resistance to literacy more generally” (Rohrbach 2012: 85). Secondly, Truth decided to insert her portrait because she wanted to emphasize that “the image, like orality, endures through the representation of the body, but, as with a written text, it is transcribed and thus interpreted” (85). So, the placement of the portrait in the frontispiece of her narratives seems to suggest that the text the reader is going to read “transcribes and interprets Sojourner Truth according to very specific rules of mediation inscribed by race, class, gender, and region” (85). This is exactly what happens with a portrait, which has to be interpreted by the viewer according to different codes: as a consequence, the person depicted in a portrait ends up being an object, rather than the subject of the picture.

So, Sojourner Truth was the first woman who understood the potentiality of the visual medium and who used it as a tool for her double liberation: on the one hand, she got rid of whites’ depictions of blackness; on the other, selling her *cartes de visite* allowed her to support her campaign for equal rights. The recurring caption “I Sell the Shadow to Support the Substance”³, which Truth inserted at the bottom of her *cartes de visite*, refers indeed to the strategy she adopted to raise funds for her social struggle: indeed, by selling the image of herself – “the Shadow” – she could collect money to support herself – “the Substance” – and her work as an abolitionist and suffragette.

Simultaneously – as I will thoroughly argue in the third paragraph of the first chapter – Frederick Douglass embarked on a similar project. He realized that there

³ Truth’s inscription hints at one of the first slogans used by photographers to advertise cameras and their ability to capture transitory moments: “Secure the Shadow Ere the Substance Fade”.

was a strict relationship between the question of dehumanization and the images through which the American society objectified and subjugated blacks, so he completely reversed the perspective. Douglass indeed appropriated the medium whites were using to negatively portray blackness so as to exploit the potential of visuality – especially of photography – in the path towards a dignified and respectable representation of the black community.

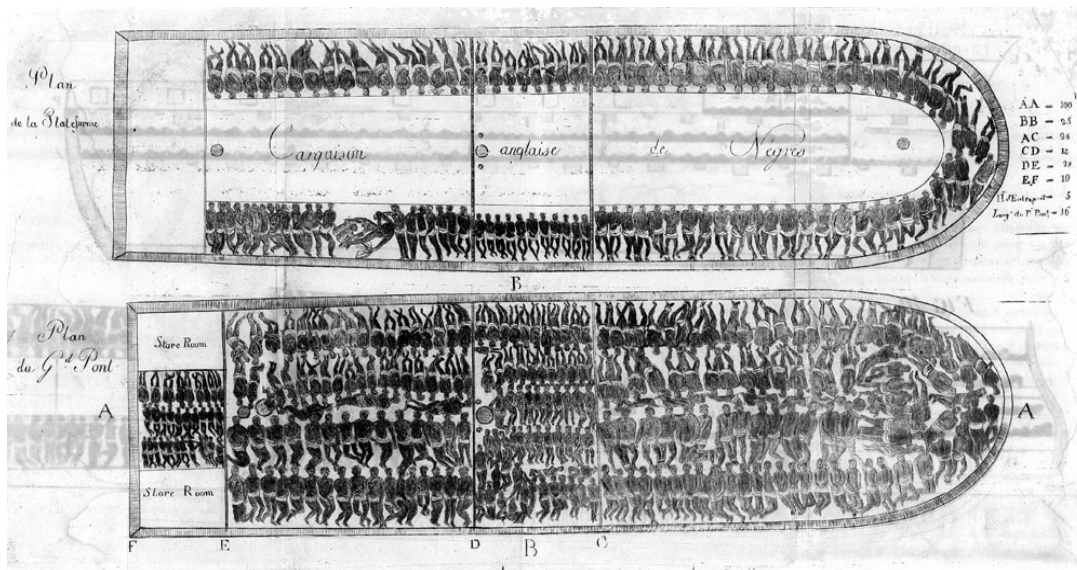
CHAPTER 1

Acquiring a voice: the construction of Frederick Douglass's self-representation

1.1 Dehumanization and emasculation as enslavement strategies

The Atlantic slave trade was a large-scale intercontinental phenomenon that for the first time brought a great number of blacks on the American soil. It has been estimated that between the 16th century and 1900 this forced migration involved about 12 million people. Nevertheless, only approximately 10 million people reached the New World due to the hard and inhuman conditions they experienced during the Atlantic crossing. For what concerns the US, from the mid-17th century and 1860 the slave trade was responsible of having brought about 338,000 Africans especially to Southern plantations, without taking into account those who died in the Middle Passage⁴. White slave drivers disembarked on African shores and they ventured into the core of the continent: here, they kidnapped not only black men but also women and children, who were brought to the African shores and imprisoned in fortresses. Most of them did not know what was happening and why they were captured: for instance, in his narrative the former slave Olaudah Equiano feared that “those men with horrible looks, read faces, and long hair” (Equiano 1794: 47) were going to eat them. Already frightened and abused, slaves were then boarded on ships – headed for the New World – where they first experienced the inhuman conditions that they had to endure for the rest of their lives.

⁴ “Middle Passage” is an expression that refers to the route that slave ships had to follow to reach the Americas across the Atlantic Ocean.



2. Diagram of the decks of a slave ship, 1814.

As the Atlantic Ocean geographically marks the distance between Africa and the Americas, the transatlantic journey symbolically marked the division between white and black, civilized and uncivilized, human and subhuman. The slaves on ships experienced an unjustified brutality and the disregard for black life that they had soon to be acquainted with: since the ship's crew is a small society with a hierarchy of ranks and tasks, the ship organization reflected the way the American society worked and the subaltern role that from this moment on black people had to play. Chained together – so as to prevent any kind of insurrection – and lying horizontally so that ships were able to carry as much “cargo” as possible (fig. 2), black people's breathing space was minimal and the chances of breakouts of diseases were very high. Blacks did not possess the antibodies of those diseases the white people were immune to, so they soon started to get sick and to die – in particular of dysentery – and most of the time corpses were thrown overboard. Moreover, seasickness particularly affected blacks since most of them had never seen the sea – some

thought that it was some kind of monster⁵ – and very few had sailed. This critical situation was worsened by the poor hygienic conditions below deck: the air was unbreathable and suffocating because those who died were sometimes left locked to those who survived and people did not have the possibility to have privacy to do their physiological needs. However, unhealthiness and filthiness were not in many cases a discouraging factor that prevented the white crew from sexually abusing young black women, who were separated from the men and thus completely in the hands of slave drivers.

Captains' on board logs cynically reported the number of the slaves who died during the Atlantic crossing but the focus was not on broken lives rather on the economic loss that this involved. A striking example of how greed clouded humanity is represented by the *Zong Massacre* of 1783, when English slave drivers threw 132 living slaves overboard because an epidemic had decimated both the cargo and the crew: given that the slaves who survived the epidemic were very weak and they could not probably have made it to their destination, the captain of the slave ship *Zong* decided to unload the ship's cargo in open water so as to cash in the insurance he had taken out before embarking on the journey and to be sure to avoid loss of profits.

Once disembarked from the ship, the ordeal was not over: the blacks who survived were exhibited and sold in auctions as if they were objects. In the US slavery took the shape of chattel slavery, i.e. people were treated and considered as movable objects, a mere piece of property with no rights of any kind that could be

⁵ In Jackie Kay's *The Lamplighter*, the protagonist Anniwaa is captured in Africa by slave drivers who bring her to a fortress near the Ocean. In hearing a noise, she says: "Outside this place, where I am trapped and kept like an animal, there is a sound I never hear before. A crashing a thudding. They say it is The Sea. I think it is a wild monster. I think it is coming for me." (p. 10)

traded, sold or purchased. In order to make the “goods” desirable and to sell them at an higher price, slaves – exhausted and worn out by the long journey and by sickness – were prepared for auctions attended by slaveholders: to hide the negative effects of dysentery, slave drivers did not hesitate to insert corks in the slaves’ anus.

The abuses, the mistreatments and the humiliations that blacks had to endure from the very first encounter with white slave drivers were part of the process of dehumanization that the American society perpetuated against them for the following two centuries. In dealing with slavery, physical violence and cruelty are probably the strategies of submission undergone by slaves that stand out the most: any minor offense could trigger the master’s anger, who did not hesitate to whip slaves, to torture and kill those planning to run away or to hang those who actually tried to escape. Nonetheless, violence was just the tip of the iceberg in the slavery system, since the white society also acted on other deceitful levels so as to manipulate the behavior and the self-perception of the black community.

For instance, religion served the purpose of justifying slavery by supporting the thesis that slavery was moral through “a literal reading of the Bible which represented the mind and will of God himself” (Morrison 1981: 16). The Bible passage that justified the enslavement of blacks referred to the episode in the Genesis in which Noah, after having drunk wine, took his clothes off and Ham – one of Noah’s sons – saw his father’s nakedness. Ham – represented as a black man – told his brothers Japheth and Shem what occurred, so they crept in their father’s tent to cover him. When Noah realized what happened, he pronounced the curse for Ham’s lineage:

Cursed be Canaan; a servant of servants shall he be unto his brethren. And he said, Blessed be the Lord God of Shem; and Canaan shall be his aservant. God

shall enlarge Japheth, and he shall dwell in the tents of Shem; and Canaan shall be his servant. (Gen. 9:25-27, King James Bible)

As a consequence, blacks – as Ham’s descendants – had to occupy the lowest stratum of the society and serve the higher ones. The divine origin of slavery was further supported by other Bible verses, which – because of slaves’ illiteracy – were read out loud by the master, who could select the passages that suited his needs. According to Frederick Douglass,

the religion of the south [was] a mere covering for the most horrid crimes, a justifier of the most appalling barbarity, a sanctifier of the most hateful frauds, and a dark shelter under which the darkest, foulest, grossest, and most infernal deeds of slaveholders [found] the strongest protection. (Douglass 1993: 110)

Contrary to expectations, religion was therefore instrumental in giving masters the divine approval for the subjugation of blacks. In his narrative, Douglass continues his reflection on how religion exacerbated slaves’ conditions instead of being a deterrent to commit violence against others:

Were I to be again reduced to the chains of slavery, next to that enslavement, I should regard being the slave of a religious master the greatest calamity that could befall me. For all slaveholders with whom I have ever met, religious slaveholders are the worst. I have ever found them the meanest and basest, the most cruel and cowardly, of all others. (110)

Furthermore, teaching the Christian religion to slaves was not only a way to indoctrinate them, but also a means to uproot black people from their African origins and heritage. Along with the removal of black people’s names, the eradication of African customs, languages and traditions was a strategy that allowed slaveholders to deprive the slaves of their culture and to use religion as a powerful means of coercion. In all cultures, religion has an extreme power over people and masters knew that: they of course did not care about their slaves’ spiritual wellness, but they

used religion in order to take advantage of the awe that people felt towards a divinity of any kind.

Along with culture and tradition, family is another fundamental element in the life of a human being. For this reason, white slaveholders needed to divide families and break familial bonds to fulfill the complete depersonalization of enslaved blacks. Besides, family and familial affection were considered by slave-owners very dangerous for the stability and the existence of slavery: breaking familial bonds was a strategy used by masters as a way to alienate slaves, to destroy them psychologically and at the same time to suppress any emotion, so as to prevent the rebellion of family members every time a slave was whipped or punished.

This process of uprooting family, i.e. the basic cell for the growth of a human being, started soon after the birth of the black child, since enslaved black women had to return to work in the fields soon after giving birth. When dealing with large plantations, children were taken care by an old slave woman, who fed and looked after them since she was too old and weak to work in the fields. The premature separation from their mothers and their families prevented in many cases the birth of any kind of affection in the children, who became emotionless towards their parents. It is not surprising that Douglass remembers receiving the news of his mother's death as if it did not affect him emotionally:

Never having enjoyed, to any considerable extent, her soothing presence, her tender and watchful care, I received the tidings of her death with much the same emotions I should have probably felt at the death of a stranger. (25)

Moreover, most of the time masters tried to part the slaves that belonged to the same family by selling them to near plantations or even scattering them in different States. Auctions were the places where both blacks coming directly from Africa and

those of the following generations were separated from their families and their loved ones. Separation from the black community of a plantation also happened when some slaves were considered troublemakers or because the master died leaving behind debts: the new owner had to pay off the debts incurred by the previous master by selling objects, livestock and slaves – which at the time were pretty much the same.

The dehumanization of blacks at all levels – as the pivotal disempowering strategy that the American society carried out in order to ensure the complete submission of African Americans – also explains the lack of violent insurrections in the archives: in Southern cotton or sugarcane plantations, the community of black slaves outnumbered the white elite composed by the master, his family and some overseers and, since they were chosen to work in the fields, slaves surely possessed the physical strength to reverse the horrific situation they were experiencing. Nevertheless, there are very few reports of resounding uprisings or rebellions against plantation owners in Southern US, because white people were able to build up a regime based not only on violence and physical oppression, but also on psychological annihilation, manipulation, coercion and brainwashing. Psychological control was far more effective than whipping and beating because “when you control a man’s thinking you do not have to worry about his actions. [...] He will find his ‘proper place’ and will stay in it” (Woodson 2006: xiii). As a result, the slavery apparatus emerged as a patriarchal institution which revolved around the master: the slave was stripped of his humanity and subjectivity and thus

he could [...] look to none but his master, the one to whom the system had committed his entire being: the man upon whose will depended his food, his shelter, his sexual connections, whatever more ‘success’ was possible within the system, his very security – in short, everything. (Black 1997: 59)

Dehumanization and its consequences were of course an unbearable burden for the black community as a whole – all of them were mistreated and subordinated to the master’s will – but it has specific implications when dehumanization intertwines with emasculation. Through the emasculation and the debasement of black masculinity, the white American society adopted a “gendered politics of slavery [that] denied black men the freedom to act as ‘men’ within the definition set by white norms” (hooks 2004: 3): deprived of their autonomy, their authority and of the ability to provide for their families and protect their women, black males were exiled and ostracized from the male community because the lack of these prerequisites – considered the inborn features that allowed a man to be considered as such in the American society – proved that they were anything but men.

The castration of black masculinity was carried out by the white society in many ways, since it continually reminded black males of their powerlessness by affirming white manhood and at the same time diminishing black manliness. Masculinity was performed by slave masters through “physical and psychological violence such as [...] humiliating male slaves by making them take off clothes in public while beating them” (Orelus 2010: 69).

What is more, the humiliation of blacks was performed not only by leaving scars on their backs, but also by wounding their psyche: “the powerlessness experienced by black males on plantations was compounded all the more by their inability to provide for and protect their families” (Walker 2012: 5). Enslaved black women had to submit to their masters’ sexual desires or they were taken by force causing repercussions also on black males who felt helpless and deprived of their manhood and virility. In *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* (1861), Harriet Jacobs

recalls how adolescence was “a sad epoch in the life of a slave girl” (Jacobs 1990: 44) because it was when her master started to harass her:

I turned from him with disgust and hatred. But he was my master. I was compelled to live under the same roof with him. [...] He told me I was his property, that I must be subject to his will in all things. (44-45)

The atmosphere of fear and terror that young black women had to go through and the consequences of refusing to surrender themselves to white men’s lust are further explained by Jacobs:

When [the slave girl] is fourteen or fifteen, her owner, or his sons, or the overseer, or perhaps all of them, begin to bribe her with presents. If these fail to accomplish their purpose, she is whipped or starved into submission to their will. (79)

Jacob continues telling how from that moment on she was obsessively followed by her master and how his unwelcome sexual advances could not be fought by her fellow slaves:

The other slaves in my master’s house noticed the change. Many of them pitied me, but none dared to ask the cause. They had no need to inquire. They knew too well the guilty practices under that roof, and they were aware that to speak of them was an offense that never went unpunished. (46)

Black males were indeed reduced to silent onlookers being unable to protect their women from the “violent depredations on the chastity of the female slaves” (Equiano 1794: 133), as Equiano recalls in his narrative. He also emphasizes the powerlessness he felt during these assaults: “I was, though with reluctance, obliged to submit to at all times, being unable to help them” (133).

Rape was of course a way to repeatedly reconfirm white masters’ authority and power over the whole black community and in particular on black males, but it had other implications. The children born from slaves – and of course those born from the sexual abuse – were property of the master because they inherited the condition

of their mother. This was exploited by plantation owners in particular after the abolition of the slave trade in 1807, when the flux of labor force from Africa was interrupted: therefore, since slavery was transmitted matrilineally, rape represented a way for white masters to increase their property⁶, to fulfill their sexual fantasies and of course to assert once again white masculinity depriving blacks of their own.

Masters' jurisdiction and authority extended to all the aspects that concerned his slaves, family ties included. It must be noted that despite the fact that "some owners honored the choices enslaved people made about whom their partners would be" (H. Williams 2010), in many cases slaves were forced to enter a relationship with people they would not have chosen for themselves. In any case, blacks were not allowed to form a family without their master's consent:

The family as a functional entity was [...] permitted to exist only when it benefited the slave-master. Maintenance of the slave family as a family unit benefited the slave owners only when, and to the extent that such unions created new slaves who could be exploited. (Clark 1971, cited in Davis 1972: 83)

Indeed, to increase their profit margins as much as possible, "masters forcibly paired 'good breeders' to produce strong children they could sell at a high price" (David 2014: 46). It often happened that masters hindered those love relationships between slaves they did not approve: whenever black slaves were caught with fellow slaves they were forbidden to meet, they were severely punished. For instance, this happens to Frederick Douglass's aunt Hester, whose whipping is narrated by Douglass himself in his autobiography. Douglass was just a child when he witnessed how Hester was harshly lashed for having disobeyed master Anthony's orders: she was told not to go out during the night and not to meet Ned Roberts, a young slave she

⁶ Children born from rape were lighter than the other slaves and they represented a constant offense to the master's wife, the mistress. Thus, both mulatto children and their mothers were mistreated by the mistress because they were a steady reminder of her husband's unfaithfulness.

was in love with. So, when her master called for her and she was nowhere to be found, and was later discovered in company with Ned, this outraged master Anthony, who

took her into the kitchen and stripped her from neck to waist, leaving her neck, shoulders, and back, entirely naked. [...] After crossing her hands, he tied them with a strong rope, and led her to a stool under a large hook in the joist, put in for the purpose. [...] 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. (Douglass 1993: 29)

Until then Douglass had never seen such a rage – “it was all new to me” (30) – and he was so frightened that he hid in a closet until the whipping was over. He writes: “[this horrible exhibition] struck me with awful force. It was the blood-stained gate, the entrance to the hell of slavery, through which I was about to pass” (28). The violence towards his aunt was recalled by Douglass as a milestone in his life as a slave, being the moment in which he really understood what slavery was and he recognized that he was like his aunt, a slave: “I expected it would be my turn next” (30). By seeing his aunt’s powerlessness to revolt against this barbarity, he himself felt helpless and thus emasculated by this demonstration of boundless white power.

Not only were the family units and familial bonds that slaves formed not legally recognized, they were indeed outlawed. Since blacks were considered as objects or animals, they could not possess any kind of right, neither to property nor on progeny. For this reason they were also forbidden to legally join in marriage: “colonial and state laws considered them property and commodities, not legal persons who could enter into contracts, and marriage was, and is, very much a legal contract” (H. Williams 2010). Nevertheless, “many enslaved people entered into relationships that they treated like marriage; they considered themselves husbands

and wives even though they knew that their unions were not protected by state laws” (H. Williams 2010).

The question of emasculation goes hand in hand with the degradation of adulthood performed by the whites to the detriment of black males. Black masculinity was infantilized as a way to lessen the virility and the self-agency of the black male, who was thus compared to a child: at every stage of his life he was addressed as “boy”, even when he was an adult man. This practice was “the usual manner of speaking to colored people on the public highways of the south” (Douglass 1993: 42), as Frederick Douglass states in his narrative.

Another strategy of emasculation is represented by black fatherhood, which was constantly called into question by white power. As a way to assert his absolute and boundless power over enslaved people, the master completely ignored the familial roles and the resulting duties that children had to observe towards their parents. Slaves had to be at their master’s disposal every time he needed them or whenever he called for their presence: obedience to the master had to be given priority over the authority of one’s own father, who had to step aside and to submit to the slaveholder’s will. An episode that shows how masters undermined the authority of fathers is told in Harriet Jacobs’s *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*:

My brother was a spirited boy; and being brought up under such influences, he early detested the name of master and mistress. One day, when his father and his mistress both happened to call him at the same time, he hesitated between the two; being perplexed to know which had the strongest claim upon his obedience. He finally concluded to go to his mistress. When my father reproved him for it, he said,

“You both called me, and I didn't know which I ought to go to first.”

“You are *my* child,” replied our father, “and when I call you, you should come immediately, if you have to pass through fire and water”. (Jacobs 1990: 17)

The whole enslavement system aimed at erasing every single desire a human being could feel and experience as well as the need for autonomy and self-determination. The question of freedom was indeed at the very center of the dehumanization process, since “a human being thoroughly dehumanized, has no desire for freedom” (Davis 1972: 86). By uprooting the desire of freedom in slaves, masters protected themselves from the escape of slaves from their plantations, which sometimes were very vast and difficult to oversee. Nevertheless, many slaves tried – but not everybody succeeded – to run away from the inhuman condition they were suffering also thanks to the Underground Railroad, a network of secret itineraries and paths which runaway slaves could follow to escape from Southern plantations to the North or to Canada⁷. Nevertheless, most fugitive slaves did not – voluntarily or involuntarily – succeed in reaching emancipation. Some escaped but hid near the plantation for a while and they eventually returned to their masters voluntarily because they did not know their way North. Other fugitive slaves, though they were resolute in finding new opportunities and better life conditions in the North, had to face the militia: in order to nip in the bud every insubordinate behavior, to prevent slaves from running away and thus to avoid incurring huge economic losses, masters relied on slave patrols that had specific duties:

to locate and return runaways; to search slave quarters looking for weapons, stolen goods, and unauthorized occupants; to break up illicit and unsupervised gatherings; to prevent or stop troublesome collaborations of slaves and free blacks; to detain slaves traveling without passes. (Melish 2002: 247)

⁷ The Underground Railroad included also white abolitionists, northern free blacks and former slaves such as Harriet Tubman who went back to the South several times to help runaway slaves to spirit away from plantations and bondage.

Destroying their desire of freedom and harshly punishing in public black runaways meant for the master exerting his full authority on the lives of his slaves and discouraging others from trying to escape.

Not only did enslaved black men yearn to get out of the clutches of their masters, but they also “saw ‘freedom’ as that change in status that would enable them to fulfill the role of chivalric benevolent patriarch. Free, they would be men able to provide for and take care of their families” (hooks 2004: 3). So, according to bell hooks, slave narratives portray an image of black masculinity which is based on the longing for taking care of their families: at the same time, to show that they were able to provide for their families was a way to affirm their manhood.

However, it must be underlined that the standard of masculinity provided by whites and in particular by masters – being the white master the embodiment of manliness and the figure black male slaves had to compare themselves to – was initially accepted by many blacks as the only possible definition of manhood⁸. For instance, even if Frederick Douglass yearned for emancipation and recognition, he accepted the hegemonic values set by the white society not providing an alternative image of black masculinity. So, Douglass aligned with the white patriarchal definition of manhood affirming that he was a man according to this definition of manliness⁹.

⁸ Similarly, many black women tried to adhere to the Victorian definition of womanhood, i.e. the dominant culture that ascribed modesty, innocence, chastity and respectability as the values that a woman had to attain to. Nevertheless, the conditions experienced by enslaved women did not allow them to conform to the Victorian canon, since their chastity was daily threatened and no one could protect them. The standards of morality, beauty and behavior is challenged only in the 20th century from few African American women, who challenged the Victorian values even through homosexuality.

⁹ Nevertheless, even though Douglass recognized the patriarchal authority of the man even toward the woman, he has a more fluid position in comparison to white men’s for what concerns women’s rights because he himself was submitted and feminized. This would bring Douglass to take part in lectures

In light of the fact that Douglass adopted the notion of manhood set by white standards, the episode of the fight with Mr. Covey – a poor farm-renter Douglass was temporary entrusted to by his master Thomas Auld – emerges as a milestone in Douglass’s re-appropriation of his manliness. Since Mr. Auld was fed up with Douglass carelessness and his whipping did not produce positive results in taming his slave, he decided therefore to send Douglass to live for a whole year with Edward Covey, a poor man who had earned the reputation of a “nigger-breaker”. The time spent with Covey was an ordeal for the fifteen-year-old Douglass, who for the first six months was whipped every day: Covey was cruel, vicious and he punished Douglass any time he could. The “nigger-breaker” also used trickery to take his slaves by surprise in the fields: whenever he caught them while they were not working, he severely punished them. After some months of incessant work in the plantation, Douglass writes that Covey succeeded in breaking and taming him:

I was broken in body, soul and spirit. My natural elasticity was crushed, my intellect languished, the disposition to read departed, the cheerful spark that lingered about my eye died; the dark night of slavery closed in upon me; and behold a man transformed into a brute! (Douglass 1993: 94-95)

One day of August 1833 Douglass and other slaves were fanning the wheat. Completely worn out from the hard work and from the heat, Douglass almost fainted because he had never been a field slave before and thus he was not accustomed to that kind of work. On hearing the fan stop, Covey surprised them and asked what the matter was. Douglass was so exhausted he could not stand and Covey started to kick and beat him. After a while Douglass gathered his strength and he went back to master Auld begging him to let him find a new home, otherwise Covey would have

organized by white feminists, where he dealt with the similar subordinated condition of slaves and white women in the American society.

killed him. Nonetheless, Douglass's plea was ignored and he was obliged to go back to Covey's estate. When he first met Covey on his return, the nigger-breaker spoke to him kindly, but after few days, he revealed his anger towards Douglass's escape. As Covey was about to tie Douglass's hands to beat him, he decided to react:

I seized Covey hard by the throat; [...] My resistance was so entirely unexpected that Covey seemed taken all aback. He trembled like a leaf. [...] I told him [...] that I had used me like a brute for six months, and that I was determined to be used so no longer. (103)

Thanks to his imposing body, Douglass was also able to overwhelm another man who was called by Covey in order to help him. The fight with Covey lasted two hours and finally Douglass prevailed. The triumph over Covey was a turning-point in Douglass's condition as a slave:

It rekindled the few expiring embers of freedom, and revived within me a sense of my own manhood. It recalled the departed self-confidence, and inspired me again with a determination to be free. [...] I felt as I never felt before. It was a glorious resurrection, from the tomb of slavery, to the heaven of freedom. (104)

This man-to-man fight was instrumental in affirming Douglass's manhood because it brought a change in Douglass's self-perception: "I was a changed being after that fight. I was nothing before – I was a man now" (Douglass 1994: 286). So, even though literacy – as I will later analyze in this thesis – enhanced Douglass's status as a human being, he "did not feel his manhood affirmed by intellectual progress" (hooks 2004: 3), but through agency and rebellion against his oppressor. Even though the struggle against Covey improved his condition – for he was never beaten again by him – Douglass remained a slave for four more years, but from the *Narrative* emerges "that his psychological sense of being free is more meaningful than his actual escape North" (Gibson 1985: 555), which happened in 1838. This moment was a watershed in Douglass's existence not because he freed himself from

bondage, but because the struggle against the slaveholder allowed Douglass to claim back the control on his own mind and psyche, for “a person is a slave [...] not when his body is held captive but when his psyche is not his own” (556). The importance of the fight with Covey and the effects that derived from his defeat can be better understood if the figure of Douglass’s antagonist is taken into account: Covey was not just a vicious overseer that mistreated slaves, but on close examination he can be considered the quintessence of the oppressive system he was a representative of. So, being Covey the embodiment of the cruelty and barbarity of the slavery institution, Douglass’s rebellion could be considered both a rebellion against the man he was constantly beaten by, and in a broader sense a struggle against the whole slavery system – and against all white males.

1.2 The controversial and stereotyped representations of blacks in the 19th-century American society

As it has emerged from the first paragraph, the American society of the 19th century was able to deprive blacks of their humanity by exercising control over them not only through violence, but also through various strategies that aimed at erasing their personality so as to completely submit them. Depriving slaves of their African heritage and of their language, removing their names and reducing them to children needing for the protection of whites were some of the most effective ways through which the American society was able to psychologically erase black selfhood and self-perception. Indeed, the most powerful weapon that the white society used to completely enslave the black community was representation.

Stuart Hall asserts that “representation means [...] to say something meaningful about, or to represent, the world meaningfully to other people” (Hall 1997: 15) not only through language, but also through “signs and images which stand for or represent things” (15). However, since signs are indexical – “they bear no obvious relationship [...] to the things to which they refer” (21) – we need to share a code that allows us to link ideas and concepts to the language we use to express them, so as to decipher the world. The code depends on social conventions fixed within each culture and since it becomes internalized during our lives, most of the time we are not aware of using codes in interpreting the reality. As a consequence, the fact that we use signs, symbols and codes to express a thought or concept and to interpret the world around us entails that our vision of reality is always mediated by representation, which, for this reason, cannot ever be truly objective. Indeed, representation has in its power the possibility of selecting some aspects and neglecting others, so the result of representation is not the perfect reproduction of

something or somebody, but just one's own strategy of representation, which implies a certain degree of subjectivity. Subjectivity implies that representation can be manipulated – consciously or not – in order to convey ideas, thoughts, fears and thus stereotypes. Therefore, although the construction of images seems to be neutral and harmless, images can carry ideological meanings and implicitly insert something or someone in a scheme as a way to control what is unknown. This appears evident in the tendency – in particular of Western cultures – “to make representations of foreign cultures the better to master or in some way to control them” (Said 1994: 100) and at the same time to define oneself in antithesis to the Other, as Edward Said asserts in dealing with the opposition between Orient and Occident¹⁰.

The notion of representation is strictly linked to the notion of race – a term used to hierarchically classify human beings into distinct groups according to physical, biological and genetic features – which in the modern era was instrumental in the enslavement of millions of black people. When dealing with slavery, the popular imagination links bondage to dark skin, but this is an association that stems from the colonial experience and the triangular slave trade, which did not start until the 16th century. Even though the attempt to classify people in separated groups dates back to the classical age, skin color and physiognomy did not determine people's

¹⁰ This binary opposition is explained by Edward Said in the essay *Orientalism*, where he argues that Western countries have invented the dichotomy Orient and Occident, i.e. two man-made geographical entities that do not exist per se, but that Western societies use to define themselves: by ascribing to the Other alienating features and stereotypes, Western countries built their own identity in opposition with what they were not. According to Said, Orientals “were rarely seen or looked at; they were seen through, analyzed not as citizens, or even people, but as problems to be solved or confined or [...] taken over” (Said 1978: 145). It should be noted that, according to Said, the notions “Orient” and “Oriental” have to be considered as referring to everything or everyone that does not belong to Western societies, not only to those coming from the East.

status in Roman society. For example, although the Roman Empire included slaves¹¹, in most cases they were enemies that the Romans had defeated on the battlefield and then enslaved, no matter what skin color they were. In the Roman Empire *black* was indeed not a synonym for *slave*, for free black Africans were known as traders and workmen. The same applies to the Renaissance, when black people were more or less integrated in European societies, which did not discriminate them for their skin color. What is more, even though slavery was still practiced indiscriminately, it represented a temporary condition in the life of a person, not a natural condition depending on a person's identity and physical appearance.

Things changed in the 17th century, when Europeans started to travel to Asia and Africa in order to discover new lands, so as to expand their sphere of influence. Here, they got acquainted with people with different lifestyles and traditions that, "inflated by their recent technical superiority" (Diop 1974: 15), they considered uncivilized and therefore inferior. As a consequence, skin color – being the most distinguishable and visible trait – became "the key signifier of cultural and racial difference" (Bhabha 1996: 101) as well as the means to identify a person's morality and values. In this period, *race* indeed started to be linked not only to external visible characteristics¹², but it also

implie[d] that the mental and moral behaviour of human beings, as well as individual personality, ideas and capacities, [were] related to racial origin, and that the knowledge of that origin provide[d] a satisfactory account of the behaviour. (Ashcroft, Griffiths, and Tiffin 2007: 180)

¹¹ It would be wrong to assert that the Roman Empire was a slave society, because it did not rely on slavery as a source of wealth: the Romans indeed practiced slavery on small scale, since war captives were used as farm hands or were employed as house servants.

¹² Furthermore, the notion of *race* is strictly connected to blood, given that the specific physical characteristics that are ascribed to a specific group are supposedly inherited through it. The crucial role played by blood in the classification of people according to their physical appearance explains also how it became another discriminating factor that enabled the existence of other two subcategories – pure and mixed race. *Pure race* defines black people and white people whereas *mixed race* refers to people with a multiracial background, i.e. people born from parents belonging to different races.

According to this theory, color came necessarily with values: Europeans looked down upon what was not Europe, stating the superiority of the white Caucasian race and the inferiority of others – especially blacks, who were at the bottom of the hierarchy. Black skin was indeed associated with lack of moral decorum, stupidity and barbarism whereas white skin was related to high morality level, rationality and great intellect, i.e. values that from white people’s point of view had to be spread to bring the light to the remote and uncivilized areas peopled by blacks.

However, the enlightenment of primitive blacks supported an imperial mission of dominance and economic expansion: race became an imperialist idea, a concept adapted by whites in order to exploit the natural riches and the manpower outside Europe. So, the urge to organize types of humans into a hierarchy goes hand in hand with the rise of colonialism, since race – along with Darwinian theories of natural selection¹³ – became the tool through which colonialist powers could legitimize colonization as a civilizing mission as well as establish and justify their supremacy over subject peoples.

Nevertheless, even though it is clear that people share certain physical features and at the same time they differ from each other because of other traits, scientists have found that there are variations in the genetic material of the human population but they are too small to determine a classification of humanity in different races. Alan R. Templeton, among many others, has demonstrated that “race is a real cultural, political and economic concept in society” (Fitzpatrick 2008) rather than a fact based on biological and genetic traits: Templeton, a professor of biology at

¹³ In the mid-1850s Charles Darwin’s *The Origin of Species* suggested the idea of natural selection and the threat of contamination for those so-called superior races that would come in contact with those considered the inferior ones. Darwin’s theories were pivotal in determining and justifying colonization and slavery under the pretense of civilizing missions or simply pursuing a natural law.

Washington University, asserts that “the genetic differences [...] may represent a mixture of both gene flow and historical events” (Templeton 1988: 636) and he recognizes environment as a crucial discriminating factor for gene flow. Thanks to these studies, it has become evident that extra biological factors such as history, language, and culture are involved in molding the subjectivity and the identity of people: with this in mind, the term *race* results a man-made concept¹⁴ based on wrong assumptions, since it is not based on scientific facts and thus on reality¹⁵.

From all this emerges clearly that race is nothing but a social construct used by white dominant powers to establish hegemony over other peoples, and that representation is probably the most pervasive strategy that hegemonic elites adopted to control subaltern groups. This appears evident when dealing with the colonization of Africa and Asia, and in particular with the slavery experience in the US.

The American society of the 19th century was permeated by images, ads, pictures, cartoons and daily objects which offered ridiculous and grotesque representations of blacks. These standardized caricatures were so pervasive that they were to be found everywhere and they inevitably shaped the minds of the American

¹⁴ Even though race is something which basically does not exist, it has basic and vital effects on our world affecting people’s lives at all levels: race can determine life expectancy, job possibilities, the access to health care, the possibility to receive a higher education and the risk to be judged with different criteria before the law.

¹⁵ Stuart Hall felt the necessity for juxtaposing the notion *race* with a new term in order to focus on cultural differences rather than on physical diversity. He indeed coined the expression *ethnicity* to go beyond all the limits that the previous expression carried along. According to Hall, “the term *ethnicity* acknowledges the place of history, language and culture in the construction of subjectivity and identity as well as the fact that all discourse is placed, positioned, situated, and all knowledge is contextual” (Hall 1996 :168). So, if the term *race* envisions the insurmountable boundaries between genetically determined groups implying an evaluation and thus a hierarchy, *ethnicity* is “an expression of a positive self-perception” (Ashcroft, Griffiths, and Tiffin, 2007: 75): the expression coined by Hall takes into consideration the cultural differences inside every group – “a composite of shared values, beliefs, norms, tastes, behaviours, experiences, consciousness of kind, memories and loyalties” (75) – that change in time and space. Nevertheless, even though Stuart Hall replaced *race* with *ethnicity* by shifting the focus from a negative to a positive evaluation, today *ethnicity* is often used as synonym for *race* to describe inherited and biological differences that cannot be assimilated and thus have nothing to do with culture.

audience. Even though the subordinate role of the black community was envisioned as a fixed inborn feature, caricatures of blacks underwent a change during the 19th century, since they had been manipulated by the white society in order to suit its needs. In the antebellum era, caricatures portrayed an image of childish blackness that conveyed the idea of slavery as a benevolent and caring institution, whereas after the Civil War these representations completely changed. In the post-bellum period, newly emancipated blacks were represented as dangerous savages who would jeopardize the American society: in this way, caricatures proved to the American white population the need of limiting blacks' freedom so as to control those uncivilized brutes.

Through the circulation and the mise-en-scène of these stereotypes, the distinctiveness of black people was leveled off since they were categorized in “fixated forms of representation that [...] constitute[d] a problem for the representation of the subject” (Bhabha 1996: 98): not only did caricatures convince whites that every black fell into one or another category, but they also had repercussions on blacks' psyche by destroying their individuality and personality. The purpose of planters was indeed not only to enslave blacks in body, but also in mind: the caricatures of blacks became so pervasive that the slaves too internalized those idealized and distorted representations of blackness. Representation indeed modifies the self-perception of oppressed people: in this way, the individual becomes fragmented, since he sees himself both from his perspective, and through the eyes of the oppressor. This leads to a double-consciousness – as W.E.B. Du Bois calls it in *The Souls of Black Folk* (1903) –, i.e. a peculiar state for a black person, who constantly

feels his twoness, – an American, a Negro; two souls, two thoughts, two unreconciled strivings; two warring ideals in one dark body, whose dogged strength alone keeps it from being torn asunder. (Du Bois 1903: 7)

What is more is that in some cases this separation did not work, because the image provided by others was so strong and permeating that completely replaced blacks' own sense of self: as a consequence, this led to episodes of internalized racism, i.e. black people could only see themselves through other people's eyes because they had absorbed the racist messages the mainstream culture provided¹⁶.

Nevertheless, many enslaved blacks voluntarily appropriated the stereotypes the white society ascribed to them by starting to behave exactly how they were expected to. Indeed, slaves adopted a mask pretending to be submitted and happy as a strategy for survival: if the master believed that they were docile and subservient, it would be easier for slaves not to risk their lives and not to be suspected of sabotaging work in the plantation, when sometimes they lamed a horse to have days off, they damaged a machine or they stole supplies.

In the antebellum US, blackness took the shape of some recurring characters that embodied the stereotyped features ascribed to blacks: at first sight, these images seemed to be benevolent, but in reality they hid judgmental meanings and mocking patronizing intents aiming at the subjection of blacks. For instance, one of the most widespread depictions of black males was the *Sambo*, the happy slave always laughing, singing, playing the banjo and dancing. The Sambo was depicted with

¹⁶ This happens for instance to Pecola, the eleven-year-old black protagonist of Toni Morrison's *The Bluest Eye* (1970). Pecola has a distorted image of herself since she is convinced she is ugly because she does not fit the standards of beauty provided by the American society. She feels the burden of being born in a society that represents whiteness as normative and which provides models of beauty everybody has to measure against. So, Pecola adopts the white supremacist mindset by looking up to white celebrities like Shirley Temple who embodied the physical features that made up beauty in the American society of the 20th century. The title of Morrison's novel refers to the fact that Pecola yearns for blue eyes, a desire related to physical appearance but it also represents her wish to improve her wretched life.

exaggerated traits – such as “large, bulging eyes and oversized red lips” (Jaynes 2005: 726) – and wearing loose-fitting ripped clothes. For instance, Page, writing in 1904, describes blacks in terms that are clearly a reference to the Sambo stereotype: for him they are lazy but at the same time loyal to his master, who “speak[s] of him with sympathy and think[s] of him with tenderness” (Page 1904: 165) and who loves him back as a father. Childishness was another feature ascribed to the Sambo: he “displayed a childlike reliance on whites and was repeatedly shown to be incapable of independent action or courageous thought” (Jaynes 2005: 726), supporting the idea that he needed the slaveholder’s fatherly protection in order to survive. At this stage of the representation of blacks, the relationship master-slave mirrored the dependent bond that children had with their father, showing mutual affection between the two. As a consequence, it contributed to present slavery as something that did not go against the natural law. Especially through the Sambo caricature, the white American society did not represent slavery as an unnatural inhuman condition, but as a suitable and necessary status for blacks, who recognized their inferiority and accepted enslavement without rising up against their masters.

The implied intention behind the representation of blacks as carefree and dependent was the emasculation of black males. The white American society rested on fixed gender roles based on sex: women – who inhabited the private sphere – had to be dependent and take care of children; the public sphere was the area of competence of men, whose manhood consisted in autonomy, independence, the ability to support one’s own family and political participation. The representation of black masculinity as unreliable and childish meant that blacks did not fit in the American society and thus that they could never be considered American citizens.



3. Thomas D. Rice playing Jim Crow in Blackface, New York City, 1833.

The *Sambo* caricature was initially brought on stage in 1820 by Thomas D. Rice who performed the *Jim Crow* character (fig. 3) in Northern American cities, where most people had little familiarity with blacks. As a consequence, the white audience really believed that blacks looked like the exaggerated character performed by Rice. Besides, these stereotyped renderings were above all spread by minstrels, i.e. a group of white actors performing in blackface that joined together in the early 1840s. Minstrels were usually white actors in blackface who mimicked the way blacks spoke and behave in order to make fun of and to ridicule them¹⁷. The aim of their performances – called *Minstrel Shows* – was to “propagate the plantation myth [since] they portrayed slavery as benign and desirable” (Saxton 1975: 18). Minstrelsy completely endorsed the representation of slavery as a benevolent, right and natural institution both to silence abolitionists and to prove to the audience that “slaves loved the master. They dreaded freedom because, presumably, they were incapable of *self-*

¹⁷ After the Civil War, black performers too took part in minstrel shows by darkening their skin color and by exaggerating their lips with white make-up as a way out of hunger and to escape from poverty.

possession. When forced to leave the plantation they longed only to return” (Lott 1992: 23).

Moreover, minstrels brought on stage characters that mocked the notion of racial equality, such as the *Zip Coon* – a dandy and a buffoon, who tried to imitate the whites and their lifestyle resulting inadequate and ludicrous. Thus, minstrelsy offered a double defense of slavery: on the one hand, it proved that slaves were happy exactly where they were, on the other it illustrated the failure of blacks to adapt to freedom.

These standardized and oversimplified images of blackness concerned both black men and black women. If black men were represented and addressed as simple-minded boys even when they were in their fifties, the image of black womanhood worked for the complete emasculation of black men that Southern planters were perpetuating in their estates. The *Mammy* (fig. 4) was presented – as Marlon Riggs’ documentary *Ethnic Notions*¹⁸ shows – as a fat and pitch black slave



4. The Mammy caricature.

¹⁸ The Emmy-winning documentary *Ethnic Notions* (1987) provides an overview of how the American society created, spread and manipulated stereotypes and caricatures of blacks to fit its needs, i.e. to justify the oppression and subjugation of blacks first as a natural condition and later by declaring the necessity to limit blacks’ savagery. *Ethnic Notions* analyses how deep-rooted caricatures – such as the Sambo, the Mammy, the Pickaninny and the Coon – were so pervasive from the 1820s that they played an important role in shaping people’s minds. The documentary portrays a society where prejudice against blacks was spread not only through the massive-scale circulation of these representation, but also through minstrelsy.

wearing a bandanna, a loyal and happily obedient woman who ran the white master's house and who took care of her master's children treating them better than her own. In this mythical representation of the nurturing and caring black woman, the Mammy was also stripped of sexual allure in order not to be perceived as a threat by the white mistress since she lived in close contact with the white family.

The Mammy stereotype, where the black woman emasculated black males acting as the controlling, bossy and strongest member of her own people, contradicted the gender norms of the white 19th-century society, according to which women had to be fragile, dependent and submissive whereas men were seen as strong, resolute and authoritative. Along with other caricatures, the Mammy represented a way in which the whites could mark a boundary between themselves and the other implying that black lifestyles were in opposition to the norm and thus to a civilized society. Through these stereotyped renderings, the white society put itself on a pedestal justifying their superiority by (more or less) implicitly asserting the inferior rank and the necessary subjugation of black people¹⁹.

The years that preceded the outbreak of the Civil War (1861-1865) brought hope for black American slaves who – inspired by the promise of equality – thought that freedom was within reach. Nevertheless, these promises were betrayed in the post-bellum years, since Southern planters did not want to give up the main labor force that allowed their plantations to thrive. As a consequence, the whites who wanted to maintain this type of society adapted the old stereotypes to the new regime of black freedom spreading the idea that blacks without white control were turning into savages. The instrumental images of harmless and childish slaves who needed

¹⁹ The relationship between whites and the black community reflected the antithesis hegemony-subalternity theorized by Antonio Gramsci, where a group is recognized as the dominating class and the other stands outside the social and political power (Gramsci 1971: 20).

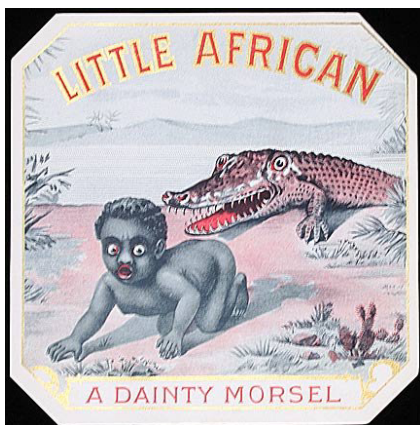
the protection and the guidance of a patriarchal institution were replaced by new portrayals of blacks, who were accused to have suddenly changed their carefree and good natured behavior towards the white slave-owners – and towards the white society as a whole – becoming a threat that had to be contained. According to the mid-19th-century American society, “industrious, saving, and, when not misled, well-behaved, kindly, respectful and self-respecting” slaves had suddenly turned into “lazy, thriftless, intemperate, insolent, dishonest” savages who lacked “the most rudimentary elements of morality” (Page 1904: 80). What is more, “they report[ed] a general depravity and retrogression [...] closely resembling a reversion to barbarism” (80), blacks having forgotten “that warm friendship which existed between master and servant” (164). The brute negro caricature was a new way of representing blackness which rapidly circulated through movies and novels²⁰ and which portrayed strong black men as a threat for white women – and white manhood, too. Representing the new generation of blacks as rebellious, brutal, vicious, aggressive, violent, animalistic and a danger for the political system and an offence to civilization was a way in which the white society could justify mistreatment, segregation and lynching as acceptable methods of social control.

The similarity between blacks and animals was underlined through the stereotyped representations of children – the *Pickaninnies* – whose unkempt hair, nakedness and dirtiness made them more similar to animals than to human beings. This image of dehumanization was sustained by the fact that they were often portrayed as victims in dangerous situations – pursued by alligators – or on trees or

²⁰ The term “brute” referred to black people appears for instance in Conrad’s masterpiece *Heart of Darkness* when Kurtz writes in his pamphlet the famous exclamation “Exterminate all the brutes!”.

next to rivers hinting at an animal-like existence²¹ (fig. 5-6). Instead of arousing compassionate emotions, the representation of black children as Pickaninnies contributed to emphasize the distance between the white and the black community, since they did not evoke any kind of sympathy on the white audience but only the feeling that blacks were subhuman.

As can be imagined, those aspects concerning the disgraceful and inhuman conditions which slaves were going through in the plantations – the beating, the lashings and the rapes of black women – were initially omitted in the public representations of slavery. Violence, mistreatment and exploitation were indeed the grounds on which slavery had been established and what really happened in most Southern plantations. Because of the great profits and the wealth that plantation owners gained thanks to slaves, the representation of slavery as it was would have been counter-productive for the American society, which manipulated the facts by bombarding the American audience with images that first defended and then legitimized the slavery institution. Only later, when thanks to abolitionists and the



5. Label of Little African Licorice, 1902.

6. Picture of a Pickaninny attacked by a rooster, 1903.

²¹ For example, the protagonist of Caryl Phillips' *Cambridge* says that she only understood later that those monkeys she saw when arriving at her father's plantation for the first time were nothing other than naked black children.

testimonies of runaway slaves all the cruelty of white masters and overseers came to light²², physical violence and strong oppression were explained by slaveholders as the only method to restrain and contain the black savagery ascribed to blacks, who – like wild beasts – could not be tamed.

Nonetheless, abuses and mistreatments were matched with a more devious strategy to persuade the American society that slavery was a natural institution because it simply followed the natural law and the hierarchy among human beings. Psychological abuse was the other trick that allowed whites to keep control over slaves: through image manipulation, blacks' personality and subjectivity were erased and at the same time caricatures allowed slaveholders to show to the US that slavery was not only profitable but also right, righteous and then necessary to maintain public safety and social order. It produced "a fixed reality which [was] at once an 'other' and yet entirely knowable and visible" (Bhabha 1996: 93) producing a kind of "regime of truth" (93) that influenced the American audience at all levels: for instance, minstrel shows attracted an heterogeneous public among which also writers and members of aristocracy, such as Henry James. Since the whites were in an hegemonic position, the issue of representation was an unequal struggle: as subaltern, the black community could try to provide an image of itself but in vain, it was not recognized since "the subaltern has no history and cannot speak" (Spivak 2006: 32) not because they have no faculty to do that, but because no-one hears them. As a consequence, freedom from slavery was just a starting point for the black community in the difficult path of finding a place in society, culture and the arts: the issue was

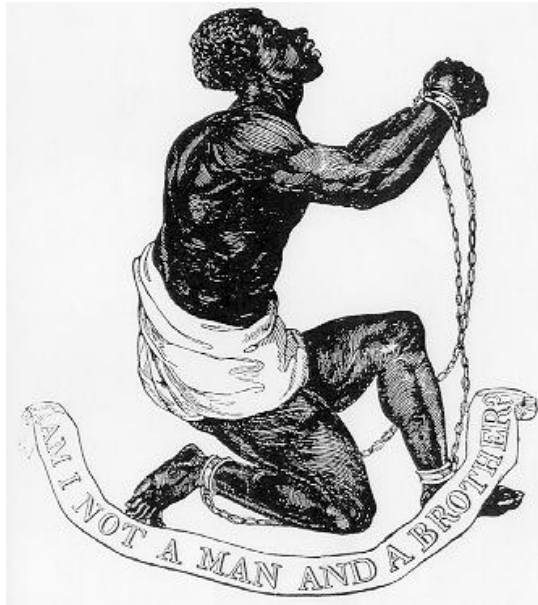
²² Nevertheless, the abolitionist discourse pivoted completely on violence, horror and abuse but it did not work when dealing with slavery in its mildest forms. To support their point of view, the narration provided by former slaves did not focus on how they managed to survive their enslavement, but on violent and horrific aspects. The aim of slave narrators was to rise compassion and at the same time indignation in the white audience encouraging them to take a stance against slavery.

moving from being represented to being able to represent themselves, an even longer struggle to acquire a voice – or better, to be heard and recognized.

1.3 Regaining black manhood: the subversion of stereotypes through Frederick Douglass's works and use of photography

From the previous paragraphs of this thesis has emerged that depriving blacks of their humanity – and black males of their masculinity – was a strategy adopted by white Americans to maintain control over slaves and to keep the whole plantation system being a money-making machine. The idea of the inferiority and of the inhumanity of blacks was spread in particular through the visual medium thanks to the stereotyped representations that the American press and commercial art daily published. Since these representations were not realistic renderings of blacks, it is clear that caricatures were not objective but they conveyed hidden meanings. Moreover, drawings and illustrations possess the advantage to convey ideas in a more indirect way rather than overtly stating one's point of view: so, visual representations have the power to manipulate the public opinion in a more sneaky way and to insinuate themselves into people's mind and perception. What is more, in order to decipher images, it is indeed not necessary to possess specific codes of interpretation, so the visual medium results more immediate and pervasive than a piece of writing. The audience was indeed bombarded by images of lazy black men, happily obedient slaves and black children similar to monkeys that portrayed blacks as objects that could be classified.

The curious paradox is that even abolitionists adopted representations that showed the passivity of blacks, which is exactly the same strategy used by the white pro-slavery lobby to portray an image of blackness incapable of self-determination. For instance, two of the most widespread images of the abolitionist propaganda depicted the victimization of blacks in two different ways: the ceramic medallion



7. Reproduction of the medallion by Josiah Wedgwood.



8. "The Scourged Back", Baton Rouge, Louisiana, 1863.

created by Josiah Wedgwood depicted a chained slave begging for mercy (**fig. 7**) and appealing to the white audience's compassion and pity; the daguerreotype of the runaway slave Gordon (**fig. 8**) focuses on the appalling scars on the slave's back, by portraying him from behind and leaving his face almost hidden by shade. As Anna Scacchi notices, Gordon's subjectivity is not part of the representation, an observation also sustained by the fact that the daguerreotype's title – *The Scourged Back* – does not mention at all the slave's name: Gordon is not represented as a person, but he is objectified and deprived of his own voice and agency by making him the mere proof of the violence perpetuated against blacks by slaveholding (Scacchi 2015: 20). In both cases, these two representations portrayed blacks as victims of white greed allowing their dignity as men to emerge: in Wedgwood's depiction and Gordon's daguerreotype the protagonist is not allowed to possess a voice, to be heard and considered a human being, showing even in this case a sort of

submission. The abolitionist movement chose these representations because they better supported their abolitionist cause: indeed, showing innocent, vulnerable and pleading slaves would work better in the battle against slavery, rather than adopting the images of fierce black leaders – like for instance Nat Turner²³ – who wanted to achieve freedom for blacks by means of violent rebellions, which however were very few in Southern US²⁴.

This may suggest that slaves working on the southern plantations of US were more passive because they accepted their enslavement, but this is not true. In dealing with heroism, the first thing that comes to mind is probably active resistance – for in the popular imagination rebellion implies violence – because these acts are probably the most sensational and thus more considered. Nevertheless, as Dana – the protagonist of Octavia Butler’s *Kindred* (1979) – finds out, in the 1860s slavery had become an inefficient institution because all of those hidden daily acts that undermined this perfectly oiled mechanism. Stealing, avoiding work, running away, abortion, killing of infants or refusing to reproduce were only few of the tricks used by slaves to sabotage their masters’ profit. As Butler said in an interview about her novel *Kindred*, all that she wanted to convey was not to show that “these people were deficient because they weren't fighting. They were fighting, they just weren't fighting with fists, which is sometimes easy and pointless” (Sanders 2004). These

²³ Nat Turner was a slave who led a slave revolt in a plantation in Virginia: on the 21st August 1831 he and his fellows slaughtered 55 white people because he said that God had told him to do that in a vision. Soon after, the insurrection ended in bloodshed, for the whites captured the rioters who were then executed. Turner fled, but he was captured two months after the rebellion, imprisoned and then hanged. For African Americans Turner was and he still is the incarnation of the black hero justified to use violence in order to fight oppression and he is considered a sort of prophet.

²⁴ The lack of violent rebellions in the southern states of US was the consequence of the violent regime of oppression built by the whites, who suppressed blacks’ free will and subjectivity. On the contrary, in other areas of the Americas such as in the Caribbean plantations or in Brazil violent rebellions were a constant threat: maroons – fugitive slaves – sometimes had established free communities in strategic places – for instance in the mountains – which the whites were not able to overwhelm.

underground acts were indeed the most efficient ways to resist and to oppose slavery because those who openly rebelled were killed and active revolts were soon suppressed by force bringing no long-lasting results. Otherwise, the daily acts of sabotaging work in the fields or life inside the master's house were acts that could pass, people could not be killed because each of them represented a sum of money for the master, who needed them in order to produce and increase his wealth.

So, violence was probably the most resounding but not the only way to reach emancipation, as Frederick Douglass's life and work prove. From the moment of his fight with Covey²⁵ and through the rest of his life, Douglass wanted to fulfill the purpose of one of his most famous quotations – “you have seen how a man was made a slave; you shall see how a slave was made a man” (Douglass 1993: 97) – by offering a kind of heroism different from the insurrectionary heroism of other black leaders: unlike Turner, Douglass succeeded in escaping without organizing a violent uprising and thus he does not represent the heroic symbol of active and violent rebellion against the slavery institution. However, Douglass became a real iconic figure of heroism in the African-American imagination in particular because – contrary to many other runaway slaves – he constantly pursued independence and self-determination especially after his emancipation, i.e. when “[he] became [his] own master” (115). Douglass's figure as spokesman of blacks' rights and social justice towered above other black leaders because he wanted to win back black people's status of human beings and blacks' manhood and he succeeded in doing so through various strategies and genres: his passionate and non-conciliatory speeches, his fiction about rebellious historical figures, the continuous rewritings of his

²⁵ It should be underlined that during the whole struggle Douglass was in a defensive position, he did not want to attack Covey but he was just reacting to the threat of being whipped by him.

autobiographies and his painstakingly studied photographs were instrumental in building his persona. They left a legacy that influences still today the African-American community.

Douglass's lack of compliance is clear from the very beginning of his career as an advocate of social equality that started in New Bedford, Massachusetts: here he became a subscriber to William Lloyd Garrison's newspaper *The Liberator*, which gave him the opportunity to publicly express his own feelings about slavery. Douglass toured Massachusetts with Garrison and other white abolitionists in 1842 to give lectures and he rapidly enhanced his abilities of brilliant philosopher and rhetorician. Nevertheless,

instead of being proud that this former Negro slave had been able in a short time to equal and even surpass many of the white spokesmen against slavery, [his abolitionist friends] were worried by it and even resented it. In a few years Douglass would become fully aware that jealousy, power and envy could take priority over principles. (Tillery 1976: 140)

The success of Douglass's first autobiography, published in 1845, and the fear that this popularity would encourage his previous master to take him back to the plantation forced Douglass to leave New Bedford in the same year and to travel to England, Scotland and Ireland to deliver abolitionist lectures to the European public. Here he riveted the audiences thanks to his charisma and charm, but there were rumors that Thomas Auld – Douglass's last master – intended to reenslave him as soon as he came back to his family. So, the English abolitionists offered to conduct a fund campaign to purchase Douglass's liberty: this caused conflict between Douglass and Garrison, because the white American abolitionist "claim[ed] that any exchange of money validated the slave system" (Barnes 2013: 51). Even though Frederick Douglass too was not happy with this decision – for he did not accept freedom as a

gift but he demanded it as a fundamental right for any human being – he acknowledged the necessity of this transaction and he “tried to explain to his abolitionist friends that his acceptance [...] was justified in light of what he termed the distinction between ‘natural freedom’ and ‘legal freedom’. His purchase only satisfied the legal requirement” (Tillery 1976: 142).

Returned to the US as a free man, Douglass wanted to put himself to the test by starting a new journal. Nevertheless, Garrison and the American abolitionists disagreed with Douglass’s decision, because not only were there many papers written by black men, but also this would not leave him enough time for his activity as a lecturer. So, Douglass temporarily abandoned his project and started to write regularly for *The Liberator*. Accused of being frightened to start his own paper by his readers, in 1847 he finally decided to publish his journal – *The North Star* – in Rochester, New York. As a result, Douglass’s new venture and his desire of emancipation from Garrison permanently ruined their friendship, but this decision and his determination in pursuing personal goals without submitting to the will of those white abolitionists that had helped him are indications of Frederick Douglass’s independence and lack of acquiescence.

The fact that Douglass pursued self-determination and that he did not feel intimidated by the white audience is clear in his famous speech *What to the Slave is the Fourth of July?*, which he gave in 1852 at the Rochester’s Corinthian Hall on the occasion of the anniversary of the Declaration of Independence. Douglass started the speech by referring to the importance of the Fourth of July for Americans, a date which marked the emancipation from England and the beginning of political freedom for Americans. Even though at the beginning of the speech he celebrated America’s

birthday with praising words, his forceful speech turned out to be anything but acquiescent: through his “mockingly obsequious celebration of the Fourth of July” (Wilson 2006: 456) filled with harsh and accusing words, Douglass defied the audience and the Declaration of Independence.

In dealing with the American Revolution, Douglass legitimized the Founding Fathers’ violent fight to assert their own right to freedom and autonomy: he considered their recourse to violence to reach freedom as an inevitable decision, since the Founding Fathers “petitioned and remonstrated [...] in a decorous, respectful and loyal manner [but] they saw themselves treated with sovereign indifference, coldness and scorn” (Douglass 1852). This issue allowed Douglass to introduce the necessity of abolishing slavery, for it existed a similarity between the heroes of the American emancipation and the heroic leaders of black rebellions: they shared the same experience of oppression and they had no choice but to resort to brute force. So, by overtly legitimizing the rebellion carried out by the Founding Fathers, Douglass also authorized the violent action of enslaved people.

This was the starting point that allowed Douglass to deal with the hypocrisy which permeated the American society: Americans were remembering and celebrating the freedom from the dependence and the oppression of England without recognizing an analogy between their previous condition of subjection and the condition they were imposing on. So, the same values that the Founding Fathers had recognized as fundamental 76 years before were those that Americans were denying to the African-American community. For this reason, Douglass went on asserting that enslavement was much more intolerable for blacks on the Fourth of July: this day indeed “reveal[ed] to [the slave], more than all other days in the year, the gross

injustice and cruelty to which he is the constant victim” (Douglass 1852). So, Douglass could not share the joy and the importance of the anniversary with the audience because the sound of rejoicing was drowned out by the suffering of those who were still living in bondage.

The hypocrisy of the Declaration of Independence from the slave’s point of view was displayed by Douglass through a vehement invective which aimed at proving “that the institution [was] anathema to the nation’s idealized principles as proposed in the Declaration of Independence” (Wilson 2006: 456) and also contrary to the Christian values the American society rested on. He rhetorically wondered why he was called to deliver that lecture, since blacks were not included in those principles of equality and freedom on which the Founding Fathers had built the nation. The strategy used by Douglass was continually alternating parts in which he included himself in the national citizenry and parts where he alienated himself from it. For instance, he introduced his speech with the introductory and inclusive formula “Fellow Citizens” (Douglass 1852) but after few lines he marked the distinction between him and the audience through parallel structures:

The rich inheritance of justice, liberty, prosperity and independence, bequeathed by *your* fathers, is shared by *you*, not by *me*. The sunlight that brought life and healing to *you*, has brought stripes and death to *me*. This Fourth [of] July is *yours*, not *mine*. *You* may rejoice, *I* must mourn. (Douglass 1852) (italics mine)

Thanks to this strategy, Douglass highlighted the liminal space that the black community was inhabiting, a threshold position of both membership and exclusion within the American society and context. Moreover, by stressing the hypocrisy of the

American population and legitimizing the use of violence, Douglass was supporting and endorsing blacks' active rebellion as acts of patriotism²⁶.

Douglass's attempt to project resilient and belligerent images of African-American manhood continued through his fiction: his novella *The Heroic Slave* (1852) portrays the historical figure of the rebellious Virginian slave Madison Washington, who led a slave revolt in 1841 on the vessel *Creole*. Washington and his fellow mutineers took control of the ship by overpowering the white crew, which was wounded or killed. The mutineers yearned to reach the free black colony of Liberia, but due to the inventory shortage, they changed their mind and they headed to Nassau. Given that Nassau was an island under the British dominion and that Great Britain had abolished slavery throughout the British Empire in 1833, Madison Washington and his fellows became free men.

Madison Washington's prominent figure is taken and fictionalized by Douglass, who intertwines the destinies of Washington and Mr. Listwell, a white man who is struck by Madison's initial and resolute monologue on freedom. From that moment on, Listwell decides to support the abolitionist movement and when five years after Washington knocks at his door, he is happy to help him to reach Canada. Nevertheless, their paths cross again when after some time Listwell sees Washington among a group of slaves ready to be sold in the market. Washington reveals to his friend that he missed so much his wife that he came back to Virginia to help her escape, but he was discovered and reenslaved. So, Listwell gives him three files that are instrumental in freeing Madison and his fellow slaves on the *Creole* and that

²⁶ The issue of patriotism raised by Douglass referred not only to the American Revolution, but also to what was happening in Europe in the 19th century: the Old Continent was indeed shaken by a series of uprisings that culminated in 1848, when many countries started to rise up against their governments or against foreign oppressors to reach independence.

caused the mutiny, which is revealed to the reader through a conversation among sailors.

From the very beginning of the novella, it is clear that Douglass wants to support the thesis he presented in the speech held at the Corinthian Hall the previous year. In *The Heroic Slave*, Douglass pragmatically links the rebellion of an African-American leader – Madison Washington – to the leaders of the American Revolution²⁷. The author describes Washington as an heroic “man who loved liberty as well as did Patrick Henry [and] deserved it as much as Thomas Jefferson” (Douglass 1999: 5), so as a sort of “founding father of black liberation movement” (Wilson 2006: 462). The question of independence from oppression and human rights is at the very center of Washington’s cause and it is overtly stated by the slave himself at the beginning of the novella, where he resolved to fight for his freedom. His soliloquy in the Virginian woods echoes the speech that Patrick Henry pronounced on the eve of the American Revolution: Henry’s famous exclamation “Give me liberty or give me death!” (Henry 1775) is paraphrased by Washington in “Liberty I will have, or die in the attempt to gain it” (Douglass 1999: 8). In establishing a connection between the two,

Douglass want[ed] the reader to believe that he or she is witness to the private deliberations of an important man, a forgotten revolutionary cut from the same cloth as Henry, Jefferson, or the hero’s namesakes. (Shuler 2009: 121)

As Paul C. Jones asserts, Douglass decided to juxtapose one of the heroes of the black emancipation and an American patriot in order to insert Madison Washington in a national frame well-known by the white audience: by referring to the notorious and shared history of the American Revolution, Douglass could

²⁷ It must be underlined that Madison Washington happens to have the surname of another Founding Father, George Washington. Moreover, the name “Madison” comes from the surname of another US President, James Madison.

communicate with an audience that had previously ignored that blacks had rights too (Jones 2005: 70).

The character portrayed in *The Heroic Slave* embodies all the features that its author envisaged and wished for a correct representation of blacks, especially black males: strong agency and assertiveness are central in Madison Washington's story, since Douglass saw them as characteristics that allowed Washington – and in wider terms the black man – to repossess his manhood. Douglass indeed sustained the enlistment of African-Americans in the Union Army²⁸ during the Civil War: according to Douglass, participating in the war meant for black Americans not only fighting for the rights of the African-American population by extinguishing the institution symbol of their oppression, but showing also their bravery so as to take back the masculinity they had been deprived of by whites²⁹.

Besides agency, Douglass recognized that literacy played an important role in the process of regaining black manhood and humanity, so he shapes the protagonist of *The Heroic Slave* as an erudite black man. This implicitly emerges anytime Douglass gives voice to Washington – for instance in the initial soliloquy or in the conversations with Mr. Listwell – but it is overtly stated at the end of the novella: Tom Grant – one of the sailors who had been on board of the *Creole* – describes the leader of the mutiny as a black man whose “words were well chosen, and his pronunciation equal to that of any schoolmaster” (Douglass 1999: 92) and remarks that he and the crew did not know “*where* he got this knowledge of language” (92).

²⁸ The Union Army included the troops of 24 Northern States which, thanks to the Emancipation Proclamation of 1863, could rely on those runaway slaves or emancipated blacks who decided to enlist.

²⁹ It should be underlined that Douglass considered enlisting in the Civil War as an act of manhood from a patriarchal point of view. Indeed, on the part of Douglass it was an acquisition of masculinity which falls once again within the notion of the normative white masculinity, i.e. Douglass did not propose a proper and alternative definition, but he accepted the standard set by white Americans.

This contrasts with his interlocutor's words, who accused the *Creole's* crew of carelessness and cowardice, since "a dozen or two of ignorant negroes" (90) could not have the intelligence to organize such a mutiny. At the time literacy was considered the prerequisite that transformed someone into a human being and thus its lack became the proof to show the non-humanity of blacks. It was true that the majority of slaves were illiterate, but this was not a consequence of their poor intellectual skills, rather one of the strategies of dominion that the whites performed against them. The law indeed forbid people to teach how to write and to read to slaves, because this could undermine the slavery system in many ways: had slaves been able to read, they would have found out from newspapers that white abolitionists were fighting for blacks' freedom and slaves would have revolted en masse.

Preventing slaves from acquiring literacy and possessing knowledge was a strategy Frederick Douglass reacted against since when he was just a child. At the beginning of the *Narrative*, Douglass presents himself as a curious child who tried to find alternative ways to make up for the knowledge he was deprived of: for instance, since he could not tell the exact date of his birthday nor his father's identity, he stole information by overhearing his master's conversations. Douglass's ability of stealing knowledge from others helps him to learn to read and write as well as to shape his own identity and thoughts. When Douglass was in Baltimore, Mrs. Auld – the wife of one of his masters – started to teach him to read, but when Mr. Auld found out about it, he forbade her to continue her lessons because, according to him,

a nigger should know nothing but to obey his master – to do as he is told to do. Learning would *spoil* the best nigger in the world . [...] He would at once become unmanageable, and of no value to his master. As to himself, it could do

him no good, but a great deal of harm. It would make him discontented and unhappy. (Douglass 1993: 58)

Douglass was present at the conversation and this was an epiphany for him and it marked one of the turning points of his life as a slave. He was able to transform a lesson of oppression into a lesson of liberation, since “from that moment [he] understood the pathway from slavery to freedom” (59). His master’s anger was the clue that learning to read and write was something potentially dangerous for the whites, so Douglass shaped his identity in contraposition to his master’s will and desires³⁰:

What he 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; and the argument which he so warmly urged, against my learning to read, only served to inspire me with a desire and determination to learn. In learning to read, I owe almost as much to the bitter opposition of my master, as to the kindly aid of my mistress. I acknowledge the benefit of both. (59)

However, the centrality of literacy in Douglass’s *Narrative* and in general in his life ends up by excluding the majority of the slave community and – as I will further argue in the third chapter – especially of women, whose condition was of double subordination, since they were oppressed both from whiteness and within the black community. Notwithstanding Douglass’s emphasis on literacy, his experience proves that it was not literacy that made him human, because the desire of knowledge and of intellectual activity was already intrinsic in Douglass’s nature, it was already there before he acquired literacy. Thus, literacy should be considered as a tool or a

³⁰ To understand Douglass’s personality, it should be taken into account that he shaped his identity in contraposition to the white identity and in particular to his master, i.e. the embodiment of manliness in the slavery system. In particular, Frederick Douglass’s identity as a male was depending on the recognition he was given by his last master Thomas Auld, even after his emancipation from him: when Douglass found out that Auld was dying, he wrote a letter to his old master on the tenth anniversary of his escape in which he states that they were equal men but distinct persons who have had and still have no connection. Nevertheless, this letter shows that even if he was a free man to all intents and purposes – for his liberty was purchased by his English friends – this antagonistic and dialectic identity with the white one is still present in the former slave even after ten years.

technology that surely helped black people to emancipate themselves, but not as the discriminating factor that makes someone free³¹.

It is not a coincidence that both Douglass and the protagonist of *The Heroic Slave* possess high-level literacy skills. The author indeed started from Washington's rebellion and he fictionalized his life by making up part of Madison's background as an enslaved man, a condition that the author knew very well. So, it is unavoidable that Douglass's past merges with Washington's, it is "as if the author is inserting himself into the protagonist [and] attempting to make himself Washington" (Wilson 2006: 463). In many excerpts of the novella it is possible to identify Douglass's own experience behind Washington's words: this is signaled by the fact that the protagonist's speeches are sometimes interrupted by parenthetical clauses – expressions which mark the intrusion of the author in Washington's monologues.

Douglass's desire to share his painful experience and to restore humanity and dignity to the whole black community is not just restricted to speeches, autobiographies and literary works, but it is also achieved through photography.

Douglass understood very soon the great potentiality of photography and daguerreotypy³² for black Americans, because they "had the potential of humanizing slaves in the eyes of the white American public" (Fleetwood 2015: 37) and at the

³¹ The role of literacy in the emancipation of slaves has been debated for long time and it has brought to two opposite traditions. Some interpretations stick to a tradition based on literacy as the path to freedom, but since the majority of blacks were not literate, accepting this interpretation would mean recognizing that blacks did not have awareness of their status of human beings. The other tradition refers to authors such as Tony Morrison, Octavia Butler, Sherley Anne Williams and other black women writers who took inspiration from Harriet Jacobs's *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*: even though Jacobs was literate and understood the importance of learning to read and write, she did not think that literacy was a humanizing and an emancipatory factor. According to Jacobs, it was not literacy that made her a human being and a free person, for she was already a free and self-aware woman. Literacy was rather a strategy she used first to survive during her enslavement and then to mislead her master when she succeeded in escaping.

³² A photographic process invented by Louis-Jacques-Mandé Daguerre through which the exact representation of an object or of a person was fixed on a sheet of silver-plated copper.

same time they represented “the means for black self-representation and self-determination” (37). Through photography, Douglass indeed wanted to appropriate the visual medium that was being misused by both the white pro-slavery society and white abolitionists: the former used images – like those that appeared in the magazine *Harper’s Weekly* or in advertising – with mocking intent to depersonalize and subjugate blacks, the latter adopted photographs showing the victimization of blacks so as to move the white American population to pity. In both cases, the black people represented were deprived not only of their personality, but also of their agency. Therefore, Douglass wanted to turn the situation around by using photography to get back the humanity that was denied to the black community, which had for the first time the possibility to become the subjects of photography.

The many advantages and implications for the black community that the new technology brought along were theorized and analyzed by Douglass in four lectures – “The Age of Pictures”, “Lecture on Picture”, “Pictures and Progress” and “Life Pictures” – which made photography emerge as an important instrument in the fight against slavery and in the progress of the emancipation of blacks after the Civil War.

First of all, according to Douglass, photographs depict people exactly as they look. As a consequence, they “could be used for unraveling the problem of racist representation” (Wexler 2012: 21), since until then white people’s representations of blacks had been influenced by stereotypes. In an article published in his newspaper *The North Star* in 1849, Douglass asserted:

Negroes can never have impartial portraits, at the hands of white artists. It seems to us next to impossible for white men to take likenesses of black men, without most grossly exaggerating their distinctive features. And the reason is obvious. Artists, like all other white persons, have adopted a theory respecting the distinctive features of Negro physiognomy. We have heard many white persons say, that ‘Negroes look all alike,’ and that they could not distinguish

between the old and the young. They associate with the Negro face, high cheek bones, distended nostril, depressed nose, thick lips, and retreating foreheads. This theory impressed strongly upon the mind of an artist exercises a powerful influence over his pencil, and very naturally leads him to distort and exaggerate those peculiarities, even when they scarcely exist in the original. (quoted in Burns and Brown 2006)

So, as Douglass asserted, photography could solve the issue of the problematic and “distorted representations of black manhood” (Wexler 2012: 24) because “African Americans could now begin to have portraits of themselves that were more impartial than earlier forms of visual representation” (Faisst 2012: 77).

Another advantage of photography is its democratic nature: its cheapness allowed “the humblest servant girl [to] possess a picture of herself such as the wealth of kings could not purchase fifty years [before]” (Douglass 1863). For this reason, in the twentieth century many blacks opened photography studios and the number of portrait photographers exponentially increased, so even the lowest strata of the American population could own self-portraits.

Moreover, Douglass theorized that the new means of representation could “also be used to confer respect upon disenfranchised individuals and groups”³³ (Hill 2012: 58), given that photographs could change the audience’s perception. This was exemplified by Douglass as such:

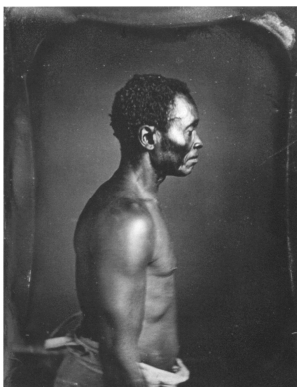
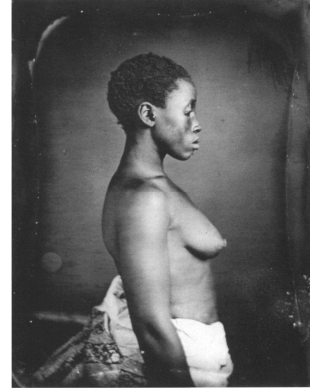
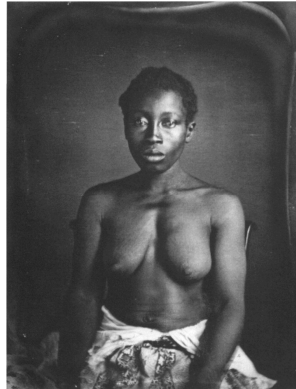
You may put a prince in a pauper’s clothes, and... the world will take him for a pauper... you may put the brightest gems of thought and feeling on a blurred and ragged sheet, and they will be flung down as trash by the masses. (58)

Thus, visual representation was envisioned by Douglass as a way to dissuade the American audience from the prejudice that specific external features necessarily coincide with a certain inner being, an idea which at the time was exponentially

³³ It is important to highlight the fact that the black leader is not referring only to blacks. Indeed, Douglass “seek[ed] inalienable rights not only for African Americans but for all Americans, including, for instance, poor whites of the South” (Faisst 2012: 76).

catching on due to scientific racism, i.e. a series of pseudo-scientific studies on black bodies that scientists started to conduct from the last decades of the 18th century. Through the measurement of human proportions – especially the size of the skull and the head shape – scientists presumed to be able to predict the degree of intelligence of people belonging to different races. As Scacchi notes, the naked black body – especially the female body – was exhibited by these scientists through frontal close-ups or profile photographs, which only emphasized the details of the body: as a consequence, the (female) black body portrayed was reduced to a mere object of experimentation, whose nakedness satisfied the voyeuristic gaze of white men (Scacchi 2006: 21). An example of scientific photographs of African Americans is represented by the series of images commissioned by the biologist Louis Agassiz (fig. 9-10-11-12) to support the thesis of polygenism, a theory according to which

9-10. Daguerreotype taken by Joseph T. Zealy and commissioned by Louis Agassiz which represents the slave Delia. Columbia, South Carolina, March 1850. Peabody Museum, Harvard University.



11-12. Daguerreotype taken by J. T. Zealy and commissioned by Louis Agassiz, which portraits Fassena, an enslaved man in the Plantation of Col. Wade Hampton, near Columbia, South Carolina. Columbia, S.C., March 1850. Peabody Museum, Harvard University.

human races do not share a common origin and descend from different ancestors.

So, Douglass decided to make a stand both against the mocking caricatures aforementioned, and against the racist ideas spread by scientific racism by exploiting in first person the social and epistemological potential of photography. Not only did the black leader theorize about the importance of photography for the self-determination of black people and as an empowering medium for racial uplift, but he also used his impressive physical presence to evoke black humanity and dignity. From the early 1840s to 1895, Douglass sat for dozens of self-portraits, which he gave away during the numerous lectures he held in US and Europe as constant and “material reminder of his presence” (Hill 2012: 46). The strong visual impression that Douglass had on the American audience and especially on white women is described by the suffragist Elizabeth Cady Stanton, who recalled in a letter the first time she saw Douglass on the occasion of one of his lectures in Boston. In referring to his physical appearance, Stanton writes that he looked “like an African prince, conscious of his dignity and power [and] grand in his physical proportions” (Stanton 1897: 44). Douglass indeed was a tall handsome towering black man, whose warrior-like physical appearance flabbergasted and charmed the feminists, who invited him to take part in their conventions on women’s rights³⁴. So, Douglass exploited his imposing bearing to become the subject of photography breaking with the previous tradition of black representation.

In stark contrast to the representations of Gordon and Agassiz-commissioned images of blacks, the self-representation adopted by Douglass in the majority of his

³⁴ It is curious that white feminists preferred to have Douglass in their conventions rather than inviting an African-American woman. Douglass was indeed really adored by white suffragists for his oratory skills and for his strong physical presence and charisma. Wherever he went, he was followed by a large group of women who tried to impress him, as I will later explain in the third chapter when dealing with Douglass’s adulterous relationship with Otilie, a German suffragist.

portraits³⁵ “replicated the pose of famous white statesmen in their portraits, but also the many aesthetic conventions of epic history painting” (Bernier 2012: 295). In his daguerreotypes and photographs he chose to adopt the typical pose expected for a nineteenth-century portrait, i.e. “the three quarter bust, the oblique angle, the gaze directed toward the right” (Wexler 2012: 36). Thus, Douglass adapted to the conventions in vogue for middle-class portraits because he wanted to be recognized by the viewer as an autonomous subject, which is why he “or the operators preferred the half-length or isolated bust format” (Hill 2012: 48). This choice is especially visible in the portraits Douglass sat for from the 1850s, where the focus is completely on the black body and in particular on his serious facial expression rather than on background. For instance, the newly discovered daguerreotyped portrait by Samuel J. Miller (**fig. 13**) displays all the strategies that from that moment on Douglass would



13. Frederick Douglass in a daguerreotype taken by Samuel J. Miller dated 1847-1852. Cased half-plate daguerreotype, 14x10.6cm. The Art Institute of Chicago.

³⁵ Up to now, Douglass’s photographic archive consists of 160 images.

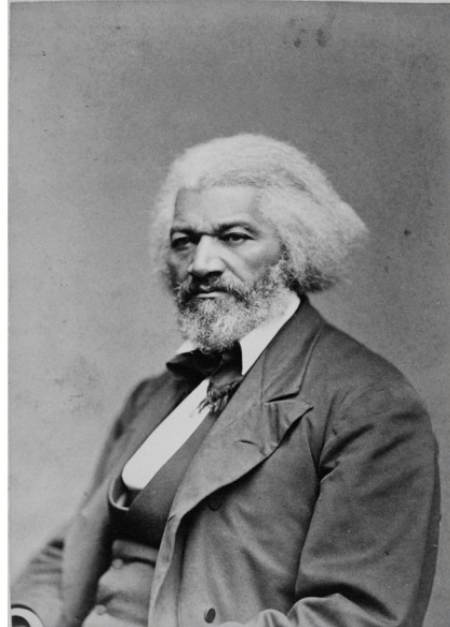
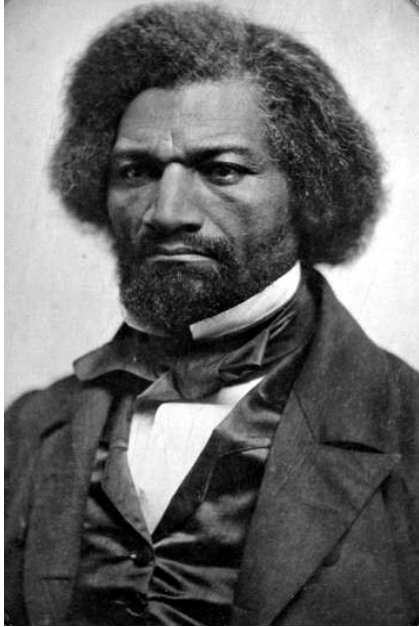
adopt to convey his own individuality and property. The portrait “adheres very closely to the conventions of heroic portraiture” (Bernier 2012: 295), since Douglass confronts the viewer with his intimidating posture and grim facial expression. As Celeste-Marie Bernier notices, his firmly set mouth together with his stern gaze create an enigmatic and forceful expression, which is a reminder for the viewer of Douglass’s determination in pursuing his freedom and in the achievement of rights (295).

The common denominator that is to be found in all Douglass’s portraits is the attention he paid to his looks. This is evident especially in the daguerreotype by Miller, where Douglass’s choice of fashion clothing displays a certain degree of dandyism, which plays a central role in Douglass’s claim for respectability. Here Douglass indeed adhered to the bourgeois standards by adopting an elegant attire: his three-piece suit is enhanced by a waistcoat adorned by a floral pattern and it is paired with an elegant bow tie. Not only his fashionable clothes, but also the choice of light and shadow contribute to convey the black leader an air of solemnity, since the fact that the right part of his face is in the shade emphasizes his somber gaze and furrowed brow. For what concerns his hairstyle, in the majority of his photographs Douglass is portrayed with unruly leonine hair showing no desire in artificially straightening or combing it. The only element that indicates Douglass’s will to discipline his hairstyle is the straight side part which hinted at white men’s contemporary hair fashion. Through this choice, Douglass distanced himself from the coeval representations of blacks and in particular of black women, whose kinky

untamed hair was always gathered up in a bun or tied back, being hair a stereotype that they had to deny because they could not control it³⁶.

The meticulous study of the self-image that Douglass wanted to convey to the audience continued throughout his entire life as an emancipated man, even though the black leader gradually changed his attitude as time passed by. Indeed, Douglass's rebellious and heroic nature is emphasized in the daguerreotype by Miller – and in general in the portraits he sat for during the mid-1840s and the early 1850s (**fig. 14**) – through the black leader's dignified and menacing attitude, but in later photographs (**fig. 15-16**) this stance gradually makes room for a milder facial expression and a patriarchal attitude. This change coincided both with the maturation of Douglass as a man – for in the 1850s he was still a young man in his thirties – and with the fact that he later assumed an important political role, for he became a statesman and the rational spokesman of the 19th-century Republican party.

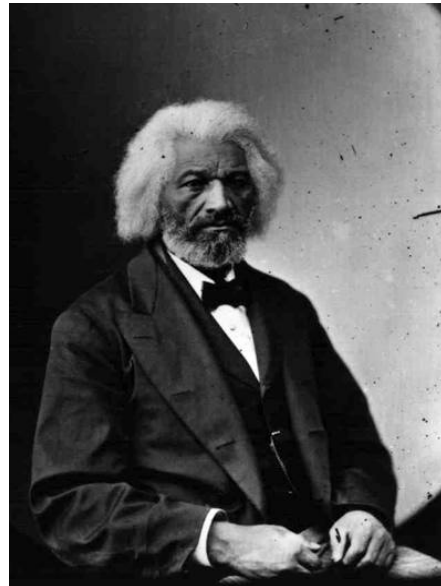
³⁶ From the invention of the hair straightener in 1870s, very few black women wore their natural style because hair straightening was probably the most common attempt for them to be similar to the standards of beauty set by whites. However, from the 1960s something changed in the self-perception of black women, because kinky hair became a symbol of pride and a challenge to white beauty standards. This revolution started from campuses and in particular from Harvard, but from that moment on more and more people started to wear their natural style because the notion of beauty was changing: unstraightened hair was adopted by people who felt beautiful as they were even though others worn it in order to express political commitment in the Civil Rights Movement. The adoption of the natural style was spread by musicians, jazz singers and actresses portrayed in magazines and it had a fundamental role in building the identity of the African-American community: blacks transformed themselves in order to find a group identity and at the same time it was an expression of the rejection of white beauty standards by simply “authentically black”. Not only did the natural style gained a political meaning, but then it was also something to be proud of, in particular for women. To finally be oneself without hiding was a liberation for the black community and also the first germ that would allow their self-esteem and self-confidence to grow. In 1970s, the Afro was modified in lots of different variations and it rather became stylish: by then, the natural style had lost its value of racial pride and it was no longer a way to express rebellion, but just a convenience for blacks.



14. Douglass, ca. 1856.

15. Douglass, ca. 1879. National Archives, Frank W. Legg Photographic Collection of Portraits of Nineteenth-Century Notables Collection FL.

16. Douglass, ca. 1890.
Credit: Mathew Brady Studio.



PART II

Frederick Douglass Today

INTRODUCTION TO PART II

The second part of my dissertation explores the ways in which the contemporary era deals with the heritage left by Frederick Douglass in terms of visual representation and self-construction of his own persona.

Up to this point I have focused on how Douglass was able to fight against the caricatured representations of blacks the American society was permeated with, which depicted blacks through stereotypes and which did not allow them to emerge as human beings with dignity and rights. Douglass acted against the visual monopoly on representation that white people had: the black leader and politician was indeed able – through his narratives, his fiction, his speeches and in particular through his accurately staged portraits and photographs – to claim the right to tell his own story without the mediation of others, namely white people. The icon of heroism that Frederick Douglass was able to build for himself resisted through time and space for many decades and his campaigns for the rights of blacks – and of oppressed people in general – left an indelible mark, which is still evident nowadays.

However, since black heroism is still a controversial issue in contemporary United States, today's American society has not embraced Douglass's multisided personality as a whole, but it has selected some aspects and toned down some others. An example of that is the bronze statue dedicated to Douglass, which was erected in 2013 at the Emancipation Hall in the U.S. Capitol Visitor Center (Washington, DC). The statue portrays an old Douglass with a dignified patriarchal bearing, so as to make him emerge as the rational spokesman of the rights of African Americans. This representation aims at mitigating Douglass's rebellious attitude and the harsh criticism that in some occasions he addressed to the white American society, for

instance in his speech *What to the Slave is the Fourth of July?*. Indeed, as Anna Scacchi notes, in the U.S. there are no statues dedicated to leaders of uprisings like Nat Turner, but the American society prefers to adopt less controversial figures, which are portrayed according to conformist criteria of leadership (Scacchi 2015). A further example is the coeval representation of Harriet Tubman, a black abolitionist and feminist who helped many enslaved people to escape through the Underground Railroad and became a spy for the Union Army during the Civil War. In 19th-century representations, Tubman is depicted with a determined stare and embracing a rifle, whereas the statue erected in Boston in 1999 decisively softens her belligerent attitude: even if the theme of the memorial conforms with the role Tubman played in the abolitionist cause – for she is portrayed leading a small group of people –, her attitude in doing so is completely different from early representations, since here weapons are replaced with a Bible.

What is more, not only does today's society often deal with African-American icons by softening their personality, but it also uses some well-known black public figures for other purposes than those of these icons. Douglass's iconic image has become a sort of overexposed brand which nowadays is to be found almost everywhere: on the Internet, it is very easy to find websites like *Cafepress* selling Douglass's face and quotations printed on T-shirts, mugs, hats, jewelry, underwear and many other objects. As Marcus Wood³⁷ notes, these items show the democratic nature of Douglass's image: the website has indeed a drop-down menu where users can select the product on the basis of their gender and age. There are indeed items and sizes suitable for women, men, children and babies, which are worn by both

³⁷ I would like to thank Marcus Wood, Professor of the University of Sussex, for allowing me to read his unpublished manuscript.

Caucasian and African-American models³⁸. However, the fact that both black and white women, men and children can wear Douglass's face does not mean that he "has been [...] embraced by the all-American family" or that racial prejudice has been overcome. The commercial appropriation of Frederick Douglass is the result of the incorporation of almost everything or everyone in e-commerce: as many other politicians, statesmen or famous people, Douglass is victim of the world-wide expansion of e-commerce and of the capitalistic market system, which dilute or deprive eminent figures of the important role they played in shaping today's American society. As a result, "Douglass is [...] reduced to a piece of pure merchandise" (Wood n.d.) and to a fashionable piece of clothing or object that has nothing to do with Douglass's struggle for equal rights.

In addition to online commerce, film industry has appropriated Douglass's ideals of freedom for the African-American population by misrepresenting his experience as a black abolitionist to support other causes, for instance the difficult Anglo-Irish relations. An example of that is John Doherty's documentary *Frederick Douglass and the White Negro* (2008), which is set in Ireland in the mid-1840s, when Douglass toured the island to lecture against slavery. The documentary focuses in particular on Douglass's sympathies with the Irish people's desire to be independent from Britain and to achieve their own freedom. It is true that Douglass identified a similarity between blacks' subjugation and Irish oppression and that he met Daniel O'Connell – an Irish leader campaigning for the independence of Ireland –, however the title and the poster of the movie completely transfigure Douglass's icon. The oxymoron in the movie title calls to mind the nickname the black leader

³⁸ Nevertheless, it is important to underline the fact that the majority of the models on *Cafepress* are white men and women, there are very few black models.

came to be known by white in Ireland – “the black O’Connell” – even though the paradox “the white negro” completely reverses the perspective. The movie poster emphasizes the title by portraying a white faced Douglass in the foreground and at the same time it merges American and Irish symbols: the Irish flag is in the background and it overlaps with the Manhattan skyline; on Douglass’s sides there are the Statue of Liberty and the O’Connell memorial in Dublin; below the black leader there is an image of the Irish revolution. Such a representation completely misuses Douglass’s image of a proud African-American man fighting for the rights of the African-American community: Douglass is indeed swallowed up in the Irish revolution, he nearly becomes a symbol of the Irish fight against Britain, but it is important to underline that this was not his war.

Moreover, Frederick Douglass’s self-mythologization is also jeopardized by politics, for the Republican party has recently appropriated his persona by using “Douglass’ historic alliance with the Republican Party of the 1860s and 1870s to try and make claims about the party’s racial bona fides today” (Kelley 2013). K. Carl Smith, the black founder of the “Frederick Douglass Republicans” movement, believes that

Douglass was a quintessential embodiment of all the Republican party stood for and stands for. He lived the American Dream we are told, he pulled himself up by the bootstraps by sheer force of will, an autodidact he rose from poverty to wealth, from powerlessness to power, he loved the values of the founding fathers. (Wood n.d.)

However, it is difficult to find a link between Douglass and the Frederick Douglass Republicans’ manifesto, since “Douglass’s thoughts on racism, sexism, freedom and slavery are in fact quite simply absent” (Wood n.d.): the movement spreads indeed unquestionable values such as respect for life and belief in personal responsibility,

but it is difficult to say that they have developed out of Douglass's legacy. Even though Smith wants to "train white conservatives to see beyond color" (Wood n.d.) and to make them feel represented even by an African-American man, his ideology ends up being a pure rhetorical gimmick, a smoke screen used by those who do not want to be accused of being racist when they assert that they support the Republican party (Geller 2013). Indeed, according to Blair Kelley, the members of the right wing are not adopting Douglass's name and iconicity because he is an emblem of advocacy of people's rights, but because it represents "some kind of political racial shield [...] to silence critics concerned about questions of race in the Republican Party of today" (Kelley 2013).

Nevertheless, over the past few years, fiction has undoubtedly been the major field of experimentation for both white and black authors for what concerns the representation of Douglass. Contemporary authors esteem and have a great regard for Douglass, but they gradually distance themselves from the self-representation that the African-American statesman built for himself. As I am going to explain in the following chapters, contemporary authors approach Douglass's iconicity in different ways: some seem to reproduce the "statue of himself" as a dignified black patriarch that is erected through his portraits and autobiographies, only giving it a more humane (and human) aspect, as Colum McCann does in *TransAtlantic* (2013); some others deconstruct Douglass's dignified icon and make fun of the African-American leader by depicting him as a lascivious drunk man, as in the case of James McBride's *The Good Lord Bird* (2013). The second chapter of my dissertation is indeed an analysis of how Douglass is represented by contemporary male authors according to differently racialized perspectives, for McCann is a white Irish author and McBride

is a black American writer. For what concerns the white appropriation of famous American icons, I will also briefly explore the consequences and the repercussions of dealing with the African-American past for white artists, whose literary works or movies are often seen as an intrusion in blacks' history and suffering.

What is more, my aim is to explore the ways in which the women who were part of Douglass's life can re-appropriate their voices, for Douglass has almost completely excluded them from his narratives and autobiographies. For this reason, the third chapter of my thesis is dedicated to the revision of Douglass's figure, but from a black female author's point of view. Jewell Parker Rhodes's novel *Douglass' Women* (2002) deals with Frederick Douglass as a male subject and with his relationship with womanhood, especially with his black wife Anna and his white mistress Otilie. By merging reality with fiction, Rhodes casts a shadow over the man and she allows Douglass's flaws, errors and lacks emerge through the voices of Anna and Otilie, who alternate in the narration and are finally able to bring to light their untold experiences and feelings.

CHAPTER 2

Revisions of Frederick Douglass by contemporary male authors

2.1 Colum McCann's *TransAtlantic*

*TransAtlantic*³⁹ (2013), a novel written by the Irish-born author Colum McCann⁴⁰, deals with the biographies of both historical and fictional figures, whose lives interweave in a time span of more than 150 years. McCann “mixes history and fiction in an exploration of the ties between Ireland and the U.S.” (Neary 2013) through the initial narration of three little-known historical events, which were only possible by means of Atlantic crossings: John Alcock and Arthur Brown’s first non-stop transatlantic flight which took place in 1919; Frederick Douglass’s lecture tour in Ireland in 1845-1846; Senator George Mitchell’s role in signing the Good Friday Agreement in 1998 – a fundamental treaty in the Northern Ireland peace process. These three events have apparently nothing in common, since they belong to different times and involve different figures – two aviators, a former slave and a US Senator – but McCann intertwines and merges these historical events with the lives of a series of fictional women – Lily, Emily, Lottie and Hannah – who represent the common thread that allows the three non-fictional stories to be connected and to form a cohesive whole.

Indeed, in the first part of the novel McCann deals with the lives of Alcock, Brown, Douglass and Mitchell by fictionalizing part of their experiences in Ireland:

³⁹ If it is not explicitly mentioned, all the quotations that are found in this paragraph are taken from the 2014 Bloomsbury edition of *TransAtlantic*. Page numbers are indicated after the quotations.

⁴⁰ Born in Dublin in 1965, Colum McCann studied journalism and became a reporter for The Irish Press Group in his early 20s. In 1993, he moved to Japan and worked there as an English teacher: in the meantime, he wrote his first collection of stories. The following year, McCann moved to New York, where he wrote for *The New York Times* and officially started his career as a fiction writer. His successful novel *Let the Great World Spin* published in 2009 won the National Book Award whereas his following novel *TransAtlantic* was included in the 2013 Man Booker Prize longlist.

McCann makes these great men run briefly into four generations of Irish women, who witness these important moments in the history of Ireland or are inspired by these famous heroic figures. The result of these encounters is made explicit in the second part of the novel, in which the four women emerge as protagonists, since McCann focuses completely on their lives: as Rich Rennicks notes, by juxtaposing the life stories of women to the lives of great men, it is as if McCann is counterbalancing history with herstory, i.e. history narrated from a feminist perspective (Rennicks 2013). As McCann asserted in an interview for NPR, “women have been given a great role in fiction. But often they have been denied access to the grand narrative of historical events that they’ve always been a part of” (quoted in Neary 2013): so, *TransAtlantic* is a way for the Irish author to fill the gaps in the archives, which are often silent for what concerns the role of women in history, an issue I will deal with in the third chapter.

In structuring his novel, McCann continually shifts back and forth in time: the first part of the novel – except for a brief fictional opening which is set in Ireland in a cottage by a lake in 2012 – is a triptych of real-life figures, who travelled to Ireland for different reasons in different historical moments, whereas the second part dealing with Lily Duggan and her lineage is narrated according to time of occurrence.

From the chronological point of view, the story begins in the mid-1840s when Frederick Douglass toured Ireland to hold lectures about the abolition of slavery. The four-month stay that Frederick Douglass spent in Ireland is the literary pretext that McCann uses to introduce Lily, the Irish matriarch who will give birth to the protagonists of the second part of the novel. McCann goes back to 1845 and he writes about the impact that Douglass had on the Irish audience and in particular on

Irish women: Lily Duggan, a maid in Mr. Webb's house – the Irish publisher who hosted the black leader – is inspired by Douglass's figure and ideals of freedom, so she decides to move to the U.S. to find better life conditions and to escape the Great Irish Famine. After a long and horrific journey on a coffin ship⁴¹, she reaches Missouri and becomes the wife of an ice merchant. When her husband dies, she takes the reins of the enterprise and transforms it into a thriving business: her efforts allow her to send her sons to college whereas she retires in a small house with her bookish daughter Emily, who becomes a journalist and is forced to publish books under a male pseudonym for many years.

Emily is the *trait d'union* between Frederick Douglass and other two historical figures, John Alcock and Arthur Brown. They were two young British aviators of the First World War who succeeded in flying nonstop from Newfoundland (Canada) to Ireland in a Vickers Vimy, a modified bomber. Indeed, the two aviators meet the local reporter after a practice run taken before their departure: she is with her seventeen-year-old daughter Lottie, who helps her mother by asking questions to the aviators and by taking photographs for the article Emily is going to write for the local newspaper. At night, Brown and Lottie run into each other in the lobby of the hotel and the teenager gives him a letter Emily wrote to the Jennings family in Cork, i.e. the family which helped her mother Lily to reach the United States. The following day, Alcock and Brown take off but their voyage is far from being easy: they run the risk of freezing, they suddenly get lost and their plane breaks down. Nevertheless, they succeed in reaching Ireland, but Brown forgets to deliver the letter, which he

⁴¹ Ships used by Irish immigrants to escape from the mass starvation caused by a potato blight from 1845 to 1852

gives back to Lottie ten years later. After that, Lottie marries and has a daughter, Hannah, whose son Tomas dies during The Troubles⁴².

An elderly Lottie and a middle-aged Hannah cross path with Senator George Mitchell in 1998, an American mediator who goes to Ireland in order to draw up the Good Friday Agreement. This treaty would pacify the uprisings in Northern Ireland and establish a set of new institutions to promote cooperation between the Republic of Ireland and Northern Ireland and between the United Kingdom and the Republic of Ireland.

After another jump forward in time, the story arrives to the present, in 2011, and this last part, together with the beginning, is a sort of frame which embeds all the other stories. This part is entirely narrated by Hannah, who has to face the current economic crisis: she is forced to sell the cottage by the lake in which she lives and decides to move north. In this last section, the author finally reveals to the reader the content of the letter Emily wrote to the Jennings family in 1919. Indeed, Hannah possesses the letter written by her grandmother about a hundred years before, in which Emily thanks the Jennings family for having been so kind with her mother Lily. This is the pretext to mention the genealogical tree of Hannah's family and to summarize her past, which is surprisingly very closely interlocked with the past of Alcock, Brown, Douglass and Mitchell.

The complexity of the structure of *TransAtlantic* runs the “risk that historical fiction, organized as it is here, will end up as a gallery of unrelated snapshots from

⁴² The term refers to the conflict happened in Northern Ireland between unionists, who wanted to remain part of the United Kingdom, and nationalists, whose aim was to become part of the Republic of Ireland. There was a very important religious aspect to it, since Catholics supported Ireland's autonomy, whereas Protestants desired to be part of the Crown. More than 3,600 people died in the conflict, which lasted about 30 years, i.e. from the civil rights march on 5th October 1968 to 10th April 1998, the day the Good Friday Agreement was signed.

the past” (Johnston 2013). This is sustained by the fact that on the surface each story seems to have a different theme, but on closer examination it is possible to trace a “unifying factor behind the stories in *TransAtlantic* [i.e.] the individual’s desire for a freedom from external hindrances” (Rennicks 2013). Indeed, the characters in the novel are fighting against both physical and metaphorical distance: Douglass is struggling for the abolition of slavery and for equal rights, which would erase privileges and social distance; Alcock and Brown are physically reducing the distance between Europe and the U.S.; Sen. Mitchell is trying to find a point of contact between unionists and nationalists. On the other hand, the four generations of Irish women are struggling for the achievement of equal rights for women; they want to be accepted as unmarried mothers; they are fighting against a male-centered society, whose crystallized structure prevents them from publishing under their own names; they are asking for a safer world for their children.

Nevertheless, even though each story focuses on a specific issue, *Freeman* – the chapter dedicated to Frederick Douglass – includes many of these themes, for instance the right of a woman to find better life conditions for herself and her children. A first example of that is when Douglass witnesses the horrors of the Great Famine caused by a potato blight: indeed, the famine was killing thousands of poor people because their alimentation relied only on this cheap crop. While he is in a carriage heading for Cork with Mr. Webb, Douglass runs into a poor undernourished woman, who is carrying a bundle of rags in which a dead child lies. The woman, clouded by hunger, seems not to have noticed that her child has starved to death, so she asks Webb and Douglass whether they could help her hungry little girl. The poor woman is so desperate that she is even willing to part from her child, for she asks

them to take her baby with them in order to improve her child's life conditions. In this episode, Douglass is the passive and shocked witness of the potato blight and of the consequences it has brought, but in a later episode he is the active motivator for change. Indeed, McCann makes Douglass cross path with Mr. Webb's seventeen-year-old maid Lily Duggan, when the black leader is hosted by his Irish publisher in Dublin. Douglass and Lily meet again when Douglass is hosted by the Jennings family in Cork, since Lily and Isabel Jennings – one of the daughters of the house – are close friends. Lily is in Cork because she is leaving for the United States, but she is too shy to reveal to Douglass the reason why she has decided to leave Ireland, so it is Isabel who discloses the motive of Lily's departure:

- Lily was inspired by you. Isn't that right, Lily?

- By me?

A small panic seized him. He could see a blush come over the young woman's face. [...]

- Your speeches, said Isabel. They were a great inspiration. Isn't that right, Lily?

The maid didn't look up.

- Boston? said Douglass. Is that your intention?

She nodded and by degrees lifted her head: a surprising shine to her eyes.

- Perhaps I'll try New York, she said. (85)

What is more, Douglass's stay in Ireland reveals in advance one of the issues which will be later dealt with in the chapter devoted to Sen. Mitchell, i.e. the conflict between those who supported the unification between Ireland and the United Kingdom and those who rejected it. Indeed, McCann chooses to include in his narration the meeting Douglass and Daniel O'Connell had in Dublin to make a comparison between the two leaders:

He heard in the newspaper that O'Connell was due to speak to a giant crowd along the Dublin docks. The tribune of people. Ireland's truest son. He had spent his life agitating for Catholic emancipation and parliamentary rule, and had written on abolition, too. Brilliant essay, fervent, impassioned. O'Connell

had adventured his life for proper freedom, was known for his speeches, his letters, his rule of law. (58)

Both Douglass and O'Connell are presented by McCann as skillful eloquent advocates of the rights of oppressed people to such an extent that, on the occasion of one of O'Connell's speeches, the Irish leader introduces Douglass to the audience as "*the black O'Connell*" (60). Indeed, Douglass goes on stage and speaks up for Ireland's independence:

I believe in Erin's cause⁴³. [...] What is to be thought of a nation boasting of its liberty, he said, yet having its people in shackles? It is etched into the book of fate that freedom shall be universally delivered. The cause of humanity is one the world over. (61)

Nevertheless, on this occasion Douglass thinks that he must weigh his words when dealing with the Anglo-Irish fight, since his speeches will have an echo in Britain and in America. Moreover, the African-American writer is later warned by Webb, who thinks that Douglass should be prudent in publicly speaking about Britain:

Perhaps he could be told more of Catholic emancipation? [...] Why had the Irish been deprived of their language? [...]
Webb took him out onto the veranda by the elbow and said: But Frederick, you cannot bite the hand that feeds. [...] He knew Webb was right. (66)

Here, Webb refers to the fact that Douglass legally became a free man because his English abolitionist friends had petitioned to buy his freedom. However, at the end of the chapter Douglass eases his mind by noting that "the Irish [are] poor, but not enslaved" (81), so there are no true similarities between the conditions of the Irish population and those of the African-American community.

This event exemplifies how McCann deals with a great African-American icon: the Irish author builds a complex character complete with minor flaws, although his

⁴³ Irish word for "Ireland".

rendering of Douglass mainly sticks to the crystallized self-representation that the black leader had built for himself.

First of all, Douglass is portrayed by McCann as a detail-oriented man, who is hyper-attentive to his looks and physical appearance, so as to evoke dignity. This is highlighted by McCann throughout the chapter dedicated to Douglass by continually referring to his powerful appearance and bearing. Indeed, at the very beginning of the chapter, McCann introduces the protagonist as a “broad-shouldered [and] muscled” (37) tall man, whose “hair [was] worn high and parted” (36) and whose youth and poise astounded the audiences, especially women.

McCann thoroughly dwells on the impact Douglass had on women, for all the Irish women Douglass meets in *TransAtlantic* fall in love with or are attracted to him. His imposing and charismatic presence charms the women of the Dublin Anti-Slavery Society, who think that he is “very young, handsome [and] debonair” (53). During meetings, women yearn to talk to Douglass or to pose for portraits with him to such an extent that “Webb said that he had never seen so many young ladies attend the events” (53). Even Lily Duggan and the Jennings sisters are not immune to Douglass’s charm: they all fall in love with him and Douglass really cares for them, in particular for Lily and Isabel Jennings. Nevertheless, McCann is cautious about representing the relationship between Douglass and the two women, as he writes that Douglass “thought of [Lily] [...] as a younger sister” (80) and that the black leader makes sure to frequently mention that he is married and has children, so as to prevent any kind of love affair. By explicitly mentioning Douglass’s marital status, it is likely that McCann wants to keep his distance from Douglass’s unconventional love life: even though in *TransAtlantic* Douglass claims to be faithful to his wife, in real life he

started a love affair with a German woman – Otilie Assing – soon after his trip to Ireland. However, even though McCann mentions that Douglass charms women during his tour, the Irish author chooses to depict him as a man of the utmost integrity, who does not fall for flattery.

The description of Douglass’s physical features goes hand in hand with numerous references to his elegant attire and refined clothing style: while in Dublin, he reads some articles published in the local newspapers which describe him as

leonine [and] feral, an elegant panther. One paper dubbed him *the Dark Dandy*. He laughed and tore the paper up – did they expect him to dress in rags of American cotton?” (54)

The narration is indeed scattered with excerpts which reveal Douglass’s obsession with a neat clean-cut appearance. For instance, on his way to one of his lectures, Douglass gets caught in the rain and he notes that “the mud [had] already dotted his overcoat. He glanced down at his shoes: they would have to be cleaned” (44). After some pages, McCann refers again to Douglass’s cleanliness and well-kept appearance by showing the black leader getting ready for dinner in his room in Cork: here, after having washed himself, he “dressed himself in his cleanest linen shirt” (76). According to Ginger Hill,

Douglass was so insistent on this image of order, esteem and propriety, that while on the lecture circuit, his wife, Anna, ensured that a freshly pressed shirt awaited his arrival at each destination. (Hill 2012: 48)

The introduction of an episode dealing with Douglass’s passion for clothing is a strategy used by McCann to introduce Douglass’s assertiveness, even towards a white man. The Irish author decides to set part of this chapter in a tailor shop, where Douglass wants to buy a new jacket. Mr. Webb asks the tailor to sew a longer cut of coat for the African-American author, but Douglass remarks: “I’m quite capable of

dressing myself” (52). Douglass’s firm reply shows his lack of compliance towards Mr. Webb, who is later “punished” by Douglass for having been too intrusive:

- I’d be rather grateful, said Douglass
 - Yes, sir?
- He looked out at Webb again.
- If you’d also fit me for a camel’s-hair vest.
 - A vest, sir?
 - Yes, a waistcoat I believe you call it.
- The tailor turned him round once more, busied himself with a measurement of Douglass’s rib cage. [...]
- You can put it on Mr. Webb’s bill.
 - Yes, sir.
 - He’s always been fond of a surprise. (53)

The importance that Douglass placed on his appearance shows a certain degree of vanity which is not only represented by McCann through the painstaking attention that the black author pays to his clothing, but it also emerges anytime Douglass works out with his two iron barbells. The barbells – made “from slave chains that had once been used in the auction houses where men, women and children were sold” (46) – are kept at the bottom of his suitcase and he brings them with him during his voyages. Douglass is portrayed working out with the barbells four times in the chapter and he is continuously worried that someone can discover that he trains with weights: for this reason, he locks himself in his room by wedging a chair against the door handle. Indeed, except for his wife Anna, nobody knows about the barbells, he keeps them a secret because “he fear[s] that Webb would deem him vain” (63). Indeed, he immediately checks whether the barbells were moved by Lily when she tidied up his room and later he lies when Mr. Webb asks him why his travelling trunk is so heavy:

- What in the world have you got in here? asked Webb.
 - Books.
- [...] Douglass grabbed for the trunk himself.
- Looks rather heavy, Old Boy.

He tried to fake ease. [...] Douglass wished he had not brought his barbells. (62)

What is more, vanity – as the recurring leitmotif in the chapter devoted to Douglass – is further expressed by Douglass’s constant need to look at himself in the mirror. He does it many times – “he looked at himself *again* in the mirror” (47) (italics mine) – even while doing exercises with the barbells – “he lifted the barbells one after another [...] until sweat dripped down onto the wood. He positioned himself to watch himself in the oval looking glass” (47).

So, in his rendering of Frederick Douglass, McCann – as a white author – does not dare to challenge the self-representation of such a great African-American leader at a level deeper than exposing self-congratulatory and proud traits in his personality: the Irish author portrays Douglass as a remarkably well-kept man, a skillful orator and a charming man fond of elegant clothes, but his representation almost completely adheres to the features that Douglass ascribed to himself in his narrative and later works. Nevertheless, even though McCann considers Douglass a worldwide icon and monument for the struggle of equal rights, the white author only takes the liberty to emphasize Douglass’s egotism and vanity by making recurring references to his barbells and to his obsession with physical appearance. McCann’s choice to stick to Douglass’s self-representation is very likely due to the fact that as a white author he does not feel entitled to question black icons, as whites’ intrusions into the heritage of the black community have always been dangerous. An example of this is the controversy faced by the white American novelist William Styron when he wrote in 1967 his version of Nat Turner’s rebellion, *The Confessions of Nat Turner*. Styron’s attempt to deal with Turner’s controversial figure caused an outrage in the black community: the American writer was accused of cultural appropriation for having

dealt with a subject that belonged to black history. Moreover, the controversy deepened in particular because in his novel Styron justifies Turner's rebellion as caused by Nat's erotic drive towards a beautiful white woman, by implicitly denying – according to the black community – black women's beauty and diminishing blacks' love of freedom.

A similar contestation may also be found in another story that deals with black heroism. Quentin Tarantino's *Django Unchained* (2012) is a movie that combines the memory of slavery and the representation of black masculinity in a new kind of hero. Tarantino's intention was to create a western, but he moves beyond the fixed formula that characterises a typical western movie: the protagonist has always been a white man who shows self-control of his body and emotion, the typical Marlboro man on the horse who has been embodied in many movies by John Wayne. Tarantino overturns this stereotype and puts a black man in a western frame by showing Django's transformation during the movie. The American director has the occasion to create a black hero by elevating Django from a lower state – at first he is a slave freed by a bounty hunter who needs his help – to a higher one – Django becomes the real hero of the movie. However, the release of *Django Unchained* caused a big debate in the US: the famous black director Spike Lee asserted that Tarantino was doing something disrespectful since he was appropriating African-American history and suffering to provide pleasure to the white audience.

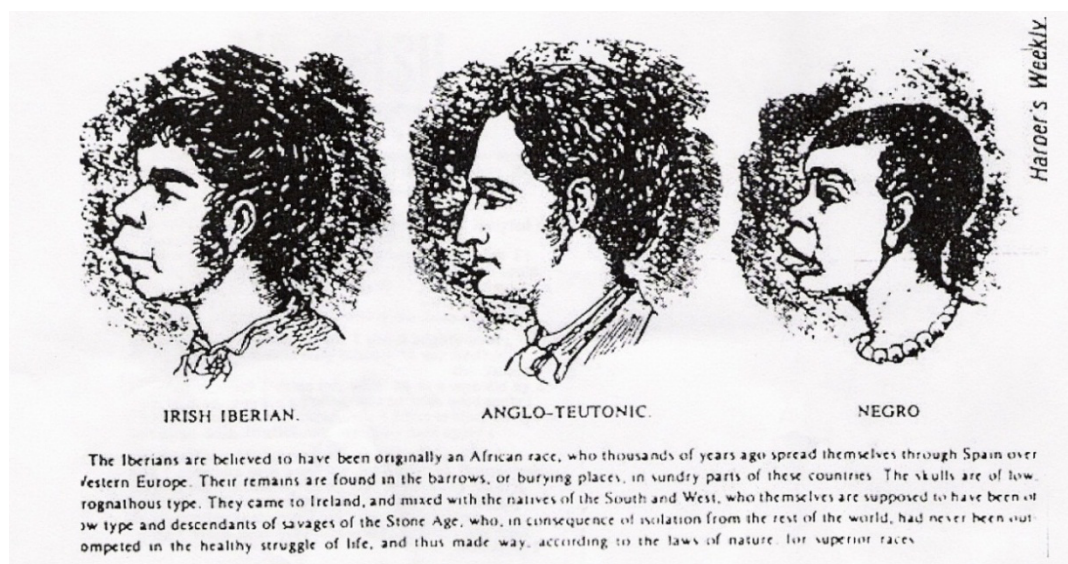
The consequences that white artists had to face whenever they tried to deal with black history probably push McCann to be a little wary in dealing with such a relevant icon: indeed, not only does the author of *TransAtlantic* intrude on a matter which belongs to the black community, but at the same time he is also questioning

one of the symbols of American culture as a whole. Over the years, Douglass has indeed been transformed by the American society into a socially accepted prototype of blackness and it is difficult for a white non-American author to overtly show that one of the most important and respectable (black) American leaders has feet of clay. For this reason, McCann does not strongly and explicitly criticize Douglass in *TransAtlantic*, but he rather presents the black leader with small flaws and innocuous habits such as his being vain and working out with the barbells. Moreover, the Irish writer exercises his right of criticism through an apparently trivial reference he makes about Douglass's thoughts on the Anglo-Irish fight. On this occasion, it is possible to read between the lines Douglass's opportunism: at first he takes Irish people's sides in their fight for independence, but he later changes his mind. Douglass indeed chooses not to line up against England because it will be counter-productive to antagonize those who purchased his freedom. This behavior denotes Douglass's timeserving in taking sides because he deceptively exploits Irish people's nationalistic feelings to support his abolitionist cause by stressing the analogy between their oppression and the subjugation of African Americans. So, Douglass takes advantage of the unrest among Irish citizens – who were considered “white blacks” in the U.K. because of their subordinate position – trying to gain their backing for his ideological struggle against slavery.

However, the Irish-black alliance never took place, in particular when about one million and half Irish migrants reached the US escaping from the Great Famine and from the disastrous social conditions created by British landowners. When the Irish disembarked on American soil in the mid-1800, the US did not welcome them with open arms: Irish migrants were indeed ostracized by American citizens due to

their poverty and their Roman Catholic religion. For this reason, the newcomers were relegated – together with blacks – to the lowest strata of the American society. Indeed, the Irish shared with blacks a similar condition of marginalization in the US to such an extent that “they might be nicknamed ‘Negroes turned inside out’ while African Americans would be ‘smoked Irish’” (McKenna 2013).

The analogy between the two groups took place in various ways. First of all, American theatres started to spread stereotyped characters who mocked Irish migrants by depicting them with features similar to blacks: the Irishman was portrayed as a happy lazy stupid man, who loves music and is always dancing. Most of the time, Irish people were also represented as drunkards and criminals as well as with ape-like features. In 1899, *Harper’s Weekly* published an image (fig. 17) which compared the head shape of three men – Irish, Anglo-Teutonic and Negro – to highlight the similarities between Irishmen and African Americans and implicitly suggesting the superiority of Anglo-Teutonic individuals.



17. Illustration from *Harper’s Weekly* showing the similarity between the Irish and the Negro.

Secondly, both Irish people and blacks experienced miserable working conditions, even though in the antebellum US the Irish were treated even worse than African Americans⁴⁴: enslaved blacks were prohibited from doing dangerous work because they were considered as valuable property by slaveholders, so life-threatening jobs such as the building of the US canal and railroad systems were left to the Irish, many of whom lost their lives while working.

One might expect that, since they shared a history of oppression, the Irish and the African-American community joined forces and helped each other to survive in the US society, but this did not happen. Indeed, “the Irish supported the continuance of slavery, turning their backs on the Abolitionist cause, despite the urgings of Daniel O’Connell [...] because they could not see beyond their own concerns and prejudices” (McKenna 2013). The abolition of slavery would indeed represent a threat for Irish migrants because they would have had to compete with blacks in the labor market. Moreover, the Irish hesitated to support abolitionists because they yearned to become American citizens according to the Naturalization Law of 1790, which stated that immigrants could acquire citizenship provided that they were free white persons of good character. So, it is likely that Irish migrants wanted to maintain a low profile and not support the abolition of slavery because they perceived it as a threat to the Constitution, which in a way legitimized the enslavement of blacks⁴⁵.

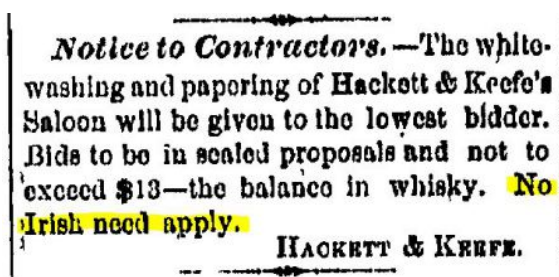
The Civil War and its aftermath were instrumental in embittering strained relationships between the two groups. Indeed, the Enrollment Act of 1863 required

⁴⁴ According to Patrick McKenna, in those days it was possible to hear slaves saying: “My master is a great tyrant, he treats me like a common Irishman” (McKenna 2013).

⁴⁵ Although in the US Constitution the words “slavery” and “slave” were never mentioned, there were however some passages which hinted at the existence of non-free people in the US and articles which indirectly regulated the importation and the taxation of the slave trade.

the enlistment of every white male between the ages of twenty and forty-five years, whereas free blacks could volunteer to fight but they were not forced to do that. If rich people could legally (or illegally) be exempted from military service by paying money⁴⁶, poor people could not avoid being drafted because they could not afford to buy their exemption. So, lower-class whites (Irish people included) were forced to join the Union Army and “the inequities in draft eligibility between blacks, monied whites, and lower-class whites [...] inevitably increased racial tensions” (Paul et al. n.d.), especially between the Irish and blacks. As a result, the Irish felt that they had been treated unfairly, so they rioted in many cities and killed enrollment officers and free blacks.

After the Civil War and the abolition of slavery, the Irish and recently-freed African Americans were “forced to compete for the same low-wage, low-status jobs” (Daniels 2009) heightening competition between the two groups, whose career aspirations broke soon into pieces. The obstructionism of the American white society affected both blacks and Irish people, for they were most of the time excluded from the world of work. Newspaper ads for jobs reported discriminatory sentences which overtly excluded not only black but also Irish applicants (fig. 18-19), who were trying



18. Job ad taken from The Daily Republican (Illinois, May 7, 1873), which explicitly prevents Irish people from applying.

19. Help wanted placard which overtly hints at discriminatory hiring practices in post-war US.

⁴⁶ To avoid military service, wealthy men most of the time took the easy way out. They sometimes “illegally bribe[d] doctors for medical exemptions [or they] legally hire[d] a substitute” (Paul et al. n.d.).

to be part and be accepted as respectable members of the dominant white culture. Indeed, during the 19th and the 20th century,

Irish immigrants lobbied for white racial status in America. Although Irish people's pale skin color and European roots suggested evidence of their white racial pedigree, the discrimination that immigrants experienced on the job [and] the simian caricatures they saw of themselves in the newspapers, meant that "whiteness" was a status that would be achieved, not ascribed. (Daniels 2009)

The difficult social conditions and the diffidence that Irish migrants found in the US pushed them to resort to criminality in order to survive. Indeed, according to Thomas Fleming, Irish gangs spread throughout many American cities to such an extent that in the mid-1850s "fifty-five percent of those arrested in New York were Irish" (Fleming 2009).

However, politics represented for many Irish people a way out from their miserable conditions. They joined the Democratic Party – which had protected slavery in the antebellum US and after the Civil War wanted to limit blacks' rights – and they started to elect Irish mayors and councilmen in many important cities, such as New York, Chicago and Boston. As a consequence, the elected delegates "appointed fellow Irish to jobs in the police and fire departments and in prisons and hospitals, beginning their rise from the lower to the middle class" (Fleming 2009).

Besides politics, also theatre and sport represented another means of social elevation both for Irish Americans and blacks: indeed, their excellent performances as actors and athletes allowed them from that moment on to earn the respect of American society and to win the distinction and acceptance for which they had been striving for decades.

2.2 James McBride's *The Good Lord Bird*

As explained in the previous paragraphs, contemporary artists adopt different strategies to deal with the American slave era and with the historical figures linked to the slavery experience. In recent years, directors and writers such as Quentin Tarantino and the American black writer James McBride⁴⁷ have adopted a new approach to represent such a sad page in American history, which “signal[s] a new way of talking – indeed joking – about race in America today” (Dreisingen 2013). They indeed represent fictional or historical events set in the antebellum US by means of irony, satire and humor to such an extent that one may wonder if today's society has become indifferent to the horrors of slavery or if the new approach signals progress in dealing with what happened about two centuries ago. According to Baz Dreisingen, “either way, it's a risky endeavor; maladroit jokes about slavery aren't just bad, they're hazardous” (Dreisingen 2013). As I have already mentioned, Tarantino had indeed to face criticism after the release of *Django Unchained* because of both the subject matter he chose and the ironic style he used to portray slavery and the people involved in it⁴⁸.

⁴⁷ The son of an African-American Reverend and of a Jewish Pole woman, James McBride was born in Brooklyn in 1957. He started his journalism career as a writer for newspapers such as *The Washington Post* and *The New York Times* as well as for magazines such as *People* and *Rolling Stone*. His first book *The Color of Water* – an autobiography in which McBride extensively deals with his mother's life before his birth – was published in 1995 and remained on *The New York Times* bestseller list for nearly 2 years. His first novel *Miracle at St. Anna* (2003) was turned into a movie by the black director Spike Lee in 2008. *The Good Lord Bird* is McBride's third novel and it was published in 2013: in the same year, it won the National Book Award for fiction. McBride is a versatile and eclectic artist: in addition to his writing career, not only did he work together with Spike Lee in 2012 co-writing and co-producing *Red Hook Summer*, but he also launched his career as a saxophonist and composed songs for other artists, too.

⁴⁸ For instance, one of the most hilarious scenes in *Django Unchained* involves the Ku Klux Klan, whose members are getting ready for a punitive expedition against the ex-slave Django. Nevertheless, they end up arguing about the fact that the white bags they are wearing are badly stitched and that they cannot see anything while riding their horses.

In literature, James McBride adheres to recent satirical representations of slavery with his novel *The Good Lord Bird*⁴⁹ (2013): he indeed distances himself from canonical dignified representations of abolitionist leaders – like for instance Colum McCann’s rendering of Frederick Douglass – by letting their flaws and weaknesses emerge. If McCann conforms to the conventional representation created by Douglass himself, James McBride does something completely different. Unlike McCann, McBride is an African-American writer: as a consequence, he is entitled to deal with the black past more freely, putting into question and even mocking eminent spokesmen of his own heritage without the risk of being accused of racism by the black community. This attitude is exactly what characterizes McBride’s depiction of John Brown and Frederick Douglass in *The Good Lord Bird*, a novel in which fiction and history interlock by means of irony and satire in order to desacralize illustrious figures of the slavery era.

Even though most of the story is fiction, McBride deals with many real-life figures in *The Good Lord Bird*, especially with the white abolitionist John Brown and the black leader Frederick Douglass, whose lives are intertwined with the life of the fictional protagonist/narrator Onion. The prologue of the novel is a device used by McBride to affirm the truthfulness of the story he is going to tell: the author inserts a made-up newspaper article which reports the discovery of some notebooks in a Negro church in Wilmington (Delaware) after a fire. One of the manuscripts reports the story of Henry “the Onion” Shackelford, a black slave freed by the old white abolitionist John Brown. Shackelford claims to have managed to survive

⁴⁹ If it is not explicitly mentioned, all the quotations that are found in this paragraph are taken from the 2013 Riverhead edition of *The Good Lord Bird*. Page numbers are indicated after the quotations.

Brown's raid on the Harpers Ferry federal armory in West Virginia in 1859, which is believed to have played a crucial role in kick-starting the Civil War.

After the prologue, the novel is divided into three parts which revolve around a core event: "Free Deeds" introduces Brown's successful attempt in freeing Onion from bondage; "Slave Deeds" reports Onion's life inside a brothel and his encounter with Pie, a prostitute Onion falls in love with; "Legend" deals with Onion's encounter with Frederick Douglass and with Brown's raid on Harpers Ferry.

The beginning of the first part introduces the misunderstanding that will affect the protagonist Henry Shackleford throughout the whole novel: "I was born a colored man and don't you forget it. But I lived as a colored woman for seventeen years" (7). Along with his father, Shackleford, a twelve-year-old mixed-race boy, is a slave in Dutch Henry's tavern in Kansas Territory until the arrival of John Brown, whose mission is to free all the slaves in the country. After the turmoil Brown causes in the tavern, he says to Henry's father:

Friend [...] you has made a wise choice. You and your tragic octoroon *daughter* here is blessed for accepting our blessed Redeemer's purpose for you to live free and clear, and thus not spend the rest of your lives in this den of iniquity here with these sinning savages. You is now free. (18) (italics mine)

This is the first time Brown mistakes Henry for a girl and the boy is initially struck by Brown's statement:

I somehow got stuck at the "daughter" section of that speech. True, I wore a potato sack like most colored boys did in them days, and my light skin and curly hair to boot made me the fun of several boys about town [...]. But everybody in Dutch's, even the Indians, knowed I was a boy. (18)

Although Henry's father tries to tell Brown that his child's name is Henry and therefore he is a boy, the white abolitionist assumes that "Henry" is the diminutive form of "Henrietta": "We have to move. Courageous friend, I will take you and your

Henrietta to safety” (19). During the fight between John Brown and Dutch Henry, Henry’s father dies, so the boy “is abruptly freed from his master and forcibly taken under Brown’s protection as a lucky mascot” (Taylor 2013). Indeed, while in the woods with Brown, Henry finds in Brown’s pocket an onion and he eats it: from that moment on Henry/Henrietta becomes Brown’s talisman because that onion was Brown’s good-luck charm. After this event, Henry – who will be considered a girl for most of the book – is nicknamed “Little Onion” and he is forced to join the Pottawatomie Rifles, Brown’s gang of abolitionists which includes also some of his sons. Onion believes that Brown is crazy and tries to escape many times for he hates being mistaken for a girl: “ain’t no way in God’s kingdom was I gonna put on that dress and bonnet. Not in no way, shape, form, or fashion was I gonna do it” (27). Nevertheless, he resolves that pretending to be a girl can be advantageous because he can rely on Brown’s protection, so Henry exploits the situation and continues his masquerade.

After Frederick’s death – one of Brown’s sons – during a fight in the woods against pro-slavery supporters, Brown disappears and Henry meets two men who tell him that the old white abolitionist is dead and who deceive him into thinking that they are going to help him find a job. The two strangers bring Onion to Pikesville (Missouri) where they sell him to Miss Abby, who runs a whorehouse. Here, Onion meets Pie, a beautiful black prostitute who works there and who helps him find a job in the brothel. Since Onion is considered an ugly girl, he is not useful to the whorehouse mistress so Onion seeks Pie’s protection and she bargains his stay in the brothel: he can work there if he will teach her to read and write. During his stay in the whorehouse, Onion falls in love with Pie and he is tempted to reveal to her that

he is a boy and that he loves her, but when he finally decides to come out with his feelings, John Brown appears and takes Onion away.

Brown and Onion take the train to Boston to raise funds for Brown's plan to assault the federal armory in West Virginia, but first Brown wants to stop off at Rochester to meet his friend Frederick Douglass, who promised to help him to recruit black people to carry out his raid. Onion and Brown are hosted in Douglass's house, where both his black wife Anna and his white mistress Otilie live. Here, Onion tries to conceal his gender to the two women by avoiding taking a bath in public and later he has a conversation with Douglass, who tries to seduce him. To get out of this situation, Henry – who can hold his liquor very well – tricks Douglass into drinking three bottles of whiskey, which get Douglass so drunk that he falls asleep on the ground shortly after.

The next morning, Onion and Brown start their tour to raise funds in American cities such as Boston, Philadelphia, New York and Detroit, where Brown makes speeches to convince people to support him and to actively join his cause. Nevertheless, his audience in Detroit is skeptical because it seems that Brown does not have a plan, so Harriet Tubman must speak in Brown's favor to find supporters. Brown indeed has a rash plan: he wants to break in Harpers Ferry armory to steal weapons and arm slaves, so that they can free themselves. Brown wants to make sure that hundreds of blacks will show up in Virginia to join the Pottawatomie Rifles during the raid, so he asks Onion to meet the Rail Man, a railroad porter who accepted to help them to gather blacks ready to fight. The Rail Man should have stopped the train before reaching the railroad station so that blacks can join Brown's army in the fight for taking control of the armory. However, Brown finds himself

with only a handful of men: Douglass and Harriet Tubman do not show up and even the group of people entrusted to the Rail Man are missing because of a misunderstanding caused by Onion. Even though Onion tries to remedy his mistake, the Rail Man is accidentally killed by one of Brown's men and he cannot help them anymore.

The raid is a total failure: one of Brown's sons is killed, whereas Brown and his men are captured and imprisoned. Onion – whose manhood is revealed after the attack – has a final conversation with Brown, who is waiting for his execution: here, Henry finds himself very fond of the Old Man and realizes that Brown is not the lunatic he believed he was.

The end of the book reveals McBride's attempt to balance John Brown's controversial reputation, given that his legacy – along with Nat Turner's – is still debatable in today's America: some consider Brown a hero, whose actions were instrumental in causing the outbreak of the Civil War; some others think that he was a terrorist and a murderer. These two points of view are experienced in first person by Onion, who has a negative opinion of John Brown at the beginning of the novel, but he eventually changes his mind at the end of the story. By choosing Onion as a first-person narrator, McBride shows the complexity of Brown's character and at the same time he “provides a limited frame, fresh angle and dark humor to the tale” (Chang 2015: 1). Indeed, Brown's personality and actions are seen through Onion's eyes, whose humor and colorful language highlight the ridiculousness of Brown's character. The old abolitionist is portrayed as “garrulous, Bible-spouting, unwavering and awe-inspiring” (Taylor 2013) and Onion's irreverent tone emerges in particular when he mocks Brown's never-ending praying:

[...] the Old Man gathered what was left of the Pottawatomie Rifles 'round him to pray – I'd say on average he prayed about twice an hour, not counting meals and including the times when he went to privy, for which he uttered a shortie even before he ducked into the woods to remove his body's impurities. (45)

In addition to Brown's endless praying, the other recurring joke in *The Good Lord Bird* is Brown's strong determination to free slaves, but from Onion's narration it seems that Brown's abolitionist plan is based on false premises: Brown says that he wants to free all the slaves in the country by violently overthrowing the slavery institution because blacks "are thirsting for the opportunity to fight for it [and] they are dying to be free" (267), but Onion does not feel the same way about it. The twelve-year-old mulatto boy indeed does not want to be free at all and he initially refers to Brown as his kidnapper, not as his savior. Indeed, Onion does not feel free while living with Brown and yearns to go back to his master, because his liberation has worsened his conditions:

I wanted to get back to Dutch's. I had an aunt and uncle back there, and while I weren't close to them, anything seemed better than starving. That's the thing about working under Old John Brown [...]: I was starving fooling with him. I was never hungry when I was a slave. Only when I got free was I eating out of garbage barrels. (43)

Onion's skeptical attitude about John Brown's anti-slavery crusade emerges also when the boy meets Frederick Douglass in Rochester. Douglass's pompous and solemn speeches about the conditions of slave life are always dampened by Onion with mocking answers or derisive rhetorical questions. Indeed, in *The Good Lord Bird* "McBride toys with contemporary understanding of Douglass as a hero and a great orator by having Onion portray the man as a coward, lecherous, vain and a drunk" (Chang 2015: 7). However, unlike what happens with Brown's character, McBride initially sticks to Douglass's conventional self-representation by holding back the parodistic slant he is going to use to portray the black leader in the

following pages. This is evident when Brown reveals to Onion why they are going to Rochester:

[...] We are going to meet with the king of the Negro people. He is a great man and a dear friend. Have no doubt, Onion, that in the coming years his exploits will be heralded across this country for generations, and you will be able to tell your children that you have met him. He has promised to fight with us to the end, and that is important, for we will need his help in our cause, to hive the bees. [...] So be kind to him. And polite. He has promised to fight with us. (215)

Moreover, when Onion sees Douglass for the first time, he describes the black leader as “a Negro unlike any I’d ever seen” (215). Douglass’s physical description from Onion’s point of view indeed conforms to the widespread majestic image that the black leader had built for himself:

He was a stout, handsome mulatto with long dark hair parted in the middle. His shirt was starched and clean. His suit was pressed and flat. His boots spotless. His face was shaved and smooth. He waited still as a statue, proud, erect. He stood like a king⁵⁰. (215)

Nevertheless, after few lines McBride discloses to the reader his intention to provide a more ambivalent characterization of Douglass by portraying the black leader as an egotistical and vainglorious man when Onion addresses him as “Fred”:

- And why do you address me as Fred? Don’t you know you are not addressing a pork chop, but rather a fairly considerable and incorrigible piece of the American Negro diaspora?
- Sir?
- I am Mr. Douglass. (216)

As for Onion’s liberation, Brown once again misinterprets Onion’s desires and feelings because he mistakes Onion’s indifference towards Douglass for excitement: “‘She a spritely little package, Douglass,’ the Old Man said proudly [...]. I reckon it is the highlight of her life to meet the man who is going to lift her people from the

⁵⁰ The last sentence calls to mind Elizabeth Cady Stanton’s description of Douglass – “He stood there like an African prince” (Stanton 1897: 44) – that I have already referred to in the first chapter.

chains of the underling world” (216). The truth is that Onion does not like Douglass at all and this is emphasized in the way the mulatto boy describes both his stay at Douglass’s house and Douglass’s lifestyle.

Indeed, the initial image of majesty and regality ascribed to Douglass in Brown’s introduction is overturned soon after, when Onion describes Douglass’s egocentricity and habits:

[...] every inch of movement in that house [...] revolved around Mr. Douglass, who walked about the house like a king in pantaloons and suspenders, practicing his oration, his mane of dark hair almost wide as the hallways, his voice booming down the halls. (220)

So, Onion makes fun of Douglass’s regal bearing by depicting him through words which belong to different semantic fields and different registers. What is more, Onion’s colorful observations and explicit language convey humor to the narration and at the same time they debunk both the black leader and his relationship with his two women. At Douglass’s, Onion indeed meets Anna and Otilie and he is taken aback when he sees “two women married to one man, and both of’em being of a different race [...]. [...] Miss Otilie was a German white woman, and Miss Anna was a colored woman from the South” (219). He also observes the unhealthy dynamics between the two women and the veil of fake politeness that they put on: “They was polite enough to each other, more or less, though I expect if they weren’t civilized, they’d a punched each other wobbly. They hated each other’s guts, is the real picture [...] (219). Even though both Anna and Otilie try to impress Douglass, Onion notices that “he regarded them both like they was cooters and stink bombs”. These vulgar similarities suggest Douglass’s uncaring attitude towards Anna’s and Otilie’s attempts to please him and as a consequence the text remarks once again his self-centeredness.

Moreover, the irony in the protagonist's descriptions of Frederick Douglass is achieved by McBride by juxtaposing important issues with trivial events. For instance, Douglass gets teased for his never-ending magniloquent abolitionist speeches by Onion, who compares them to the noise of a parade the boy once saw:

I once heard the mighty marching band at Tuskegee in Tennessee beating at a parade, and that band of two hundred strong, with drums beating and trumpets wailing was an enjoyment. But it weren't nothing compared to the blasting of Mr. Douglass practicing his orations about the fate of the Negro race in his house. (220)

McBride often refers to Douglass's oratory skills, but unlike other authors, he represents the African-American leader as a verbose person, a man who makes speeches about everything that comes to his mind. The conversation that Douglass and Onion have in Douglass's study is an example of that:

First he orated on the plight of the Negro. [...] When he was done orating on them, he orated about the fowl, the fishes, the poultry, the white man, the red man, the aunties, uncles, cousins, the second cousins, his cousin Clementine, the bees, the flies, and by the time he worked down to the ants, the butterflies, and the crickets, he was stone-cold, sloppy, clouded-up, sweet-blind drunk [...]. (228)

To mimic Douglass's prolixity, McBride uses a list of noun phrases from different semantic fields which have nothing in common, whose aim is to convey humor to the tale. Thus, enumerations are – along with hyperbole and exaggerations – a further strategy exploited by McBride to divest Douglass of his iconic status: this is particularly evident when Onion mentions the black abolitionist's insatiable hunger and his addiction to alcohol:

That man gobbled down more in one setting than I seen thirty settlers chunk down in three weeks out in Kansas Territory; steak, potatoes, collard greens, yams, sweet potatoes, cucumbers, chicken, rabbit, pheasant, buck meat, cake, biscuits, rice, cheeses of all types, and kneaded bread; he washed it down with milk, curd, peach juice, cow's milk, goat's milk, cherry juice, orange juice, grape juice. Neither did he turn away from alcohol libations and drinks of all sorts, of which several types was kept on hand at the house: beer, lager, wine,

seltzer, even bottled water from various springs out west. That man put a hurting on a kitchen. (220)

To strengthen the ironic angle of the narration, the chapter dedicated to Douglass – “Meeting a Great Man” – is scattered by Onion’s sporadic positive evaluations of Douglass, which clash with the previous parodistic observations he had made. For instance, not only in the chapter title but also throughout the chapter, Douglass is addressed by Onion as a “great man”: “He done it like he was in a hurry, impatient, like he was used to people listening to his thoughts, which I expect they was, him being a *great man*” (224); “I weren’t interested in fighting for nobody’s cause. But I didn’t want to offend the *great man*, so I said, ‘Well, thank you, sir’” (222); “It didn’t seem proper to call a *great man* like him Fred” (223) (all italics mine). With this epithet and with sentences which apparently refer to Douglass’s great knowledge and grandeur – “since he knowed everything, I gived him my best answer” (223) and “with people like you leading the way [...] we can’t go wrong” (224) –, Onion pretends to consider Douglass a remarkable man, but the reader immediately understands that the protagonist’s apparently acquiescent attitude is a spoof of Douglass’s egocentricity and hypocrisy.

During their conversation, Douglass explains to Onion the plight of the enslaved black community through a passionate and emphatic speech, which is immediately deflated by Onion, who (probably intentionally) misinterprets one of Douglass’s words and the meaning of his speech:

- The Negro knows not where he was born, or who is mother is. Or who his father is. Or his real name. He has no home. He has no land. His station is temporary. He is guile and fodder for the slave catcher. He is a stranger in a strange land! He is a slave, even when he is free! He is a renter, an abettor! Even if he owns a home. The Negro s a perpetual letter!
- Like A, B, and C?
- No child. A renter.

- You rent here?
- No, dear. I buy. But that's not the point. (225)

Douglass continues his invective against white slaveholding, but he contradicts himself. Indeed, he states that by forcibly taking blacks' lives, whites think that they possess blacks and that they know them. However, neither Douglass really knows Onion, both because Douglass does not spot Onion's true sexual identity and because the black leader miscalls his "real" name:

- This slender neck, the prominent nose – this, too, belongs to the slave owner. They feel it belongs to them. They take what is not rightfully theirs. They know not you, Harlot Shackelford.
- Henrietta.
- Whatever. They know not you, Henrietta. (225)

Not only does this passage show the hypocrisy in Douglass's words, but it also remarks the scarce considerations he has toward women, since he calls Onion "Harlot", a synonym for "prostitute" or "promiscuous woman". However, he tries to seduce Onion with sweet talk but since Onion does not cede to Douglass's seductive manners, the black leader tries to sexually assault Onion. The clever boy however uses Douglass's ego to get out of this embarrassing situation.

[...] he was doing it his own self, squeezing and savaging my arse, working his hand down toward my mechanicals as he spoke the last, with his eyes all dewy, so I hopped to my feet.
 "I reckons your oration's done drove me to thirst [...]. I wonders if you have some libations around in one of these cabinets here that would help loosen up my gibbles and put me in the right understanding of some of your deepest comminglings about our peoples". (226)

Onion and Douglass drink down three bottles of whiskey and, since Onion can hold his drink and Douglass cannot stand being outdone by a country girl, the black activist is soon drunk and loses interest in Onion. Before leaving Douglass's study, the boy notices that "the more bleary-eyed he got, the more he talked like a regular down-home, pig-knuckle-eatin' Negro" (228). Indeed, during the whole chapter,

McBride insists on Douglass's oratory skills and choice of words. The author uses correct American English every time the black abolitionist speaks, but as soon as Douglass gets drunk, McBride decides to use vernacular English, so as to show Douglass's true mother tongue: "It's hot in here. Open da winder" (228). By the end of the chapter, Douglass's iconic image is shattered:

He was setting in the middle of the floor by then, his suspenders off, clasping the bottle. [...] Then laid his mighty Negro head, with his mighty hair like a lion's mane, down flat on his face, and was out cold, snoring when I quietly took my leave. (228)

One may wonder why an African-American author such as James McBride chooses to depict one of the most relevant black icons of the American history – and thus of his history – through such a daring narrative, since McBride's rendering of Frederick Douglass evidently clashes with Douglass's conventional representations. Indeed, on the surface it seems that McBride's attempt to depict Douglass as a flawed playboy may represent a sort of *lèse-majesté* towards the black leader, but on closer examination McBride's aim is to focus on Frederick Douglass as a man, not on Douglass as an icon. In an interview released by NPR, McBride asserts that he wanted to write a book about people who did real things, so in his novel there is no space for those who made speeches and did politics (McBride 2013b). For this reason, Frederick Douglass is not depicted as a hero in *The Good Lord Bird*, but as a verbose man who talks about the abolition of slavery without taking action and doing something tangible to help his cause. Indeed, Henry describes Douglass as "a man of parlor talk, of silk shirts and fine hats, linen suits and ties. He was a man of words and speeches" (331) who gives up on Brown by refusing to help him in the Harpers Ferry mission. McBride insists on Douglass's nature of "a speaking parlor man" (332) in *The Good Lord Bird* by highlighting his oratory skills and talent in the

advocacy of the abolition of slavery. Moreover, in the NPR interview he adds that Douglass was an excellent writer and a great leader. So, McBride is conscious of Douglass's greatness and of his pivotal role in the abolition of slavery as well as in the racial uplift of blacks. Nonetheless, McBride adopts in his novel a specific point of view in depicting Douglass: his aim is to stress that even leaders have personal lives, so he does not deal with Douglass's public image as a leader for African Americans, on the contrary he explores and fictionalizes his private life. The perspective adopted by McBride allows the reader to compare the public image that Douglass had built for himself with his private life and to notice that the two spheres strongly clash. McBride asserts indeed that "Douglass was flawed in the sense that he lived like a man who had power lived back in that time, and most men who had power lived the way they wanted to live. And women had very little, if any, power at all" (McBride 2013b). This is exemplified by the author through the relationship between Douglass and his two women, an aspect which Henry repeatedly stresses during the chapter dedicated to the black leader. McBride stresses the fact that the protagonist is struck by the way in which Douglass treats Anna and Otilie, who are constantly ignored or mistreated by him. Infidelity, drunkenness, voracity and arrogance emerge in the chapter dedicated to Douglass as features that nobody would ever ascribe to a great man, but all these flaws make Douglass a human being. So, McBride's representation of one of the most important black spokesmen of all times is not a way to destroy Douglass's iconicity and reputation, but the author's aim is to desacralize the black leader's self-representation, to divest him of his almost sacred aura by showing that he was a man like any other, a man with flaws and vices.

In addition to Douglass's characterization as a common flawed human being, the interesting thing in *The Good Lord Bird* is that its author focuses on forgotten or neglected aspects of black life and means of survival adopted by blacks during enslavement, which nobody ever mentions or pay attention to when dealing with slavery. For this reason, *The Good Lord Bird* ends up being an even truer tribute to blacks' cleverness than previous narratives only focusing on their victimization by white masters. For instance, even though Onion hates being mistaken for a girl, he takes advantage of this misunderstanding and he exploits the situation to obtain Brown's protection and go undisturbed. Indeed, the mulatto boy has a hidden agenda: he is planning to escape and go back to his master. So, Onion "sees the potential benefit in passing as a female" (Chang 2015: 4), since he exploits gender as a means of surviving: "I seen chance to jump. My mind was on escape, so I said, 'I got to toilet, but a girl needs a bit of privacy'" (28).

Onion's experience in passing as a female is the pretext used by McBride to deal with "passing", a phenomenon which can involve both gender and race. "Passing" represents "the ability of an individual to 'pass' as a member of a different racial, gender or other identity group than the one to which they themselves primarily or partly belong" (Chang 2015: 4). Over the years, because of rape during slavery and later because of interracial marriages, in the US it has been more and more difficult to classify a person as either black or white, because skin color comes in different tones. However, a classification based on a black-white binarism evolved during the 19th and 20th century and since phenotype started to be difficult to read in American society, the classification was based on the heritage of a single person,

rather than on skin color⁵¹. According to the “one-drop rule”, mixed-race people were indeed considered African Americans even though their skin was light because their blood had been tainted by “one drop of black blood”. As a consequence, mixed-race people were automatically assigned to the lower race of their mixed heritage, even though their physical features were much more similar to the other race. Thus, it is not surprising if those blacks who looked like white people passed into the Caucasian race, because it meant improving their lives by acquiring the privileges limited to white people. Even though in *The Good Lord Bird* racial passing cannot be exploited by the mulatto protagonist for he is always perceived as black throughout the novel, McBride probably chooses to indirectly deal with “passing” from a gender point of view by disguising the protagonist as a female. Onion’s masquerade “can be seen as McBride’s comment on the ridiculousness of a binary system of racial categorization as it has been used since the slavery era” (Cheng 2015: 5), given that this binarism is still present in today’s US and affects people’s lives.

What is more, disguising the protagonist as a female could be seen as a metaphor for the way in which white masters treated male slaves: Henry is seen and treated like a girl just as black enslaved men were feminized in order to maintain control over them. Depriving black males of their masculinity was indeed a strategy used by whites to assert their power over their slaves and to psychologically rule over them, as I have thoroughly argued in the first chapter of my dissertation. Nevertheless, McBride refuses to focus on the victimization of Henry, but on the contrary he shows the protagonist’s cleverness in turning a disadvantageous situation

⁵¹ The difficulty in determining the racial background of a person contributed to spread unfounded rumors like the “nail test”. According to this belief, the finger nail of a person could help in detecting their racial origin: it was believed that “black blood [was] evidenced by a purplish semicircle on the nail beds of a person of color” (Kerr 1969: 22).

into an opportunity to survive. Through Onion's words, McBride brings to light those practices and habits that slaves adopted so as to improve their survival chances:

I near choked calling myself a member of the opposite nature, but lying come natural to me in them times. Truth is, lying come natural to all Negroes during slave time, for no man or woman in bondage ever prospered stating their true thoughts to the boss. (28)

As I have already mentioned in the first part of my dissertation, slaves pleased white people by adapting to the idea the white society had about them, so that masters felt that they were in total control and did not feel the urge to constantly monitor them. As a consequence, lying to masters and appeasing them were strategies used by slaves, which allowed them to have at least a little agency of their own because they were not considered as a threat for the white family.

Moreover, unlike abolitionist narrations which focused on slavery in its harshest form, *The Good Lord Bird* reports the existence of mildest forms of slavery. Henry's statement "I weren't never hungry as a slave, nor was never whipped scandalous" (231) points to the fact that the slaveholding South included different forms of enslavement, not necessarily as violent and degrading as the collective imagination of slavery usually evokes.

For all these reasons, McBride's narration results unconventional and complex, since it merges not only uncommon themes which are dealt with through humor, but also different levels. For instance, the title of the book reveals in advance the symbolism which permeates McBride's novel, since the bird of the title is a recurring element throughout the narration. The good Lord bird – or ivory-billed woodpecker – is a large woodpecker with a peculiar plumage: the feathers which cover its body are black and white, whereas its head has red feathers. The first time Onion sees the bird is when he is in the woods with Frederick, Brown's son:

Up at the top of a thick birch, a woodpecker hammered away. He was a good-sized feller. Black and white, with a touch of red around him.

“Ever seen one of them?” he asked.

“I wouldn’t know one bird from the next.”

Fred stared up at it. “They call that a Good Lord Bird,” he said. “It’s so pretty that when man sees it, he says, ‘Good Lord.’ [...] They say a feather from a Good Lord Bird’ll bring you understanding that’ll last your whole life [...].”

(30-31)

From this moment on, the good Lord bird appears during the narration in sporadic moments and its presence leaves room for many interpretations. On the one hand, the woodpecker can represent Onion himself, given that the black and white plumage can hint at the mulatto boy’s heterogeneous heritage. Moreover, Onion’s story can be considered a sort of journey towards knowledge and understanding, a feature ascribed to the good Lord bird by the collective imagination, as Frederick says in the aforementioned excerpt. On the other hand, the fact that the bird often appears when Brown is nearby – for instance during Onion and Brown’s final dialogue when the white abolitionist is in jail – can suggest that there is a correspondence between Brown and the woodpecker. Indeed, the plumage of the good Lord bird brings together black and white feathers exactly as John Brown’s mission of an equal multiracial society made up of black and white people⁵².

If we consider the symbolism of the good Lord bird from a broader perspective, it can also take on a different meaning. Given that spotting the good Lord bird is generally taken as a good omen for it is a rare animal, the fact that he seldom shows up in the narration could stand for the sporadic goodness of the world. Indeed, in his novel “McBride paints an overwhelmingly nihilistic vision of the human race as a whole – even the ‘hero’ John Brown is shown to be a murderer and

⁵² According to this interpretation, the red hint in the bird’s feathers can stand for the bloodshed and the violence that according to Brown are necessary to achieve equality among races.

certainly far from moral purity” (Chang 2005: 3). For this reason, the sporadic brief appearances of the black and white woodpecker can represent that sometimes good actions are still possible, even in a violent world like the brutal era portrayed in *The Good Lord Bird*.

As previously stated, McBride juggles many unusual themes and interweaves many levels at once in his novel by rewriting and fictionalizing real events happened during the slavery era. Even though *The Good Lord Bird* is extremely innovative for the humoristic slant the author conveyed to the narration, at a superficial level the novel however seems to stick to a tradition of male authors who just focus on famous male leaders without taking into consideration the point of view of those women who were close to them. If it is true that *The Good Lord Bird* does not explore the direct perspectives of the women who were part of Douglass’s life, on closer examination it is possible to consider the chapter dedicated to the black leader a gendered critique to Douglass’s icon. Indeed, even though Douglass’s women are not central in *The Good Lord Bird* as they are in the novel I will deal with in the following chapter, in McBride’s novel the author provides a gendered revision of Frederick Douglass’s iconic image, since the author mocks the black leader’s sexual politics. Adopting a protagonist/narrator who acts as if he were a girl for most of the book allows indeed the African-American author to cast a shadow on Douglass’s sexual and gender politics: the fact that Henry disguises as Henrietta for most of the novel – and that as a girl he is exposed to Douglass’s sexual harassment and to his rape attempt – enables the narrator to be in a way influenced by his gender masquerade. Indeed, Henry experiences the feelings, the frustrations and the difficulties of being a woman back in those days, and in particular of being a woman at Douglass’s. It is as if Henry

adopts a whole new perspective after having worn female clothes: by putting himself in women's shoes, he is more sensitive to Anna and Otilie's conditions and to the abuses they have to suffer every day while living with Douglass.

Although *The Good Lord Bird* – unlike previous novels which described Douglass's life – does deal with Douglass's sexual and gender politics, the author chooses to adopt a third party to investigate the relationship between Douglass and his two women. As a result, Anna's and Otilie's viewpoints remain once again unexplored, for they are not given a voice by McBride, an opportunity which Jewell Parker Rhodes gives them with her novel *Douglass' Women*.

CHAPTER 3

The Douglass icon from a female point of view

3.1 Jewell Parker Rhodes's *Douglass' Women*

As it has emerged from the previous chapter, James McBride divests Frederick Douglass of his iconic status by portraying the African-American leader from a non-conventional point of view, namely in his private life. McBride's *The Good Lord Bird* gives evidence of Douglass's eccentric lifestyle, especially for what concerns his unconventional love life, but the narration is still male-centered, for neither Anna's nor Otilie's perspectives are shown or explored. Indeed, in McBride's novel, the relationship between Douglass and the two women is briefly described by Henry, but the two women are not given a voice. Anna and Otilie are minor characters in *The Good Lord Bird*, their presence is indeed ancillary to the text, but it has a specific purpose. At Douglass's, Henry indeed notices the antagonistic relationship between Anna and Otilie, but he especially describes how they are mistreated by Douglass. As a result, Anna and Otilie are instrumental in describing their beloved's uncaring and haughty attitude towards them as well as in making him emerge as a flawed person.

If *The Good Lord Bird* is courageous for the humoristic slant conveyed by its author, Jewell Parker Rhodes's *Douglass' Women*⁵³ (2003) is remarkable and innovative for its new approach to Douglass's biography. Indeed, the innovation in *Douglass' Women* does not lie so much in the style Rhodes uses as in the perspective

⁵³ If it is not explicitly mentioned, all the quotations that are found in this chapter are taken from the 2003 Washington Square Press edition of *Douglass' Women*. Page numbers are indicated after the quotations.

she adopts, for Rhodes – as a black female author⁵⁴ – gives back to Anna and Otilie the voice they have been deprived of for decades both in Douglass’s autobiographies and in later novels dealing with the African-American leader.

Douglass’s representation of black women in his autobiographies is indeed problematic: women are portrayed as defenseless fragile beings who lived in constant fear of being sexually assaulted or whipped by the master or by overseers. According to his point of view, enslaved women are passive witnesses of their condition, they are not able to react because the slavery system has completely annihilated their agency. As a result, women emerge through Douglass’s words as mere victims of the slavery experience: in his narrative, indeed, female characters – such as his aunt Hester and his mother – are portrayed as targets of their master’s brutality and as helpless witnesses of the cruel mechanisms of slavery. The episode concerning Hester is indeed introduced in the narration as a milestone in Douglass’s experience as a slave, for he first understands that he is a slave when he sees his master whipping his aunt: Hester is mentioned by the author just to show to the reader how cruel slavery is and how vicious masters can be when slaves disobey them. In the same way, Douglass’s mother is remembered by the author just for her absence and the lack of filial love he experienced towards her, since masters could part newborns from their mother whenever they wanted to. The representations of Hester and of Douglass’s mother as they appear in the *Narrative* are instrumental for the black author in depicting slavery as an immoral and vicious institution. Describing Hester’s beating and the consequences of his mother’s absence are indeed strategies used by

⁵⁴ Born in Pittsburgh (Pennsylvania) in 1954, Jewell Parker Rhodes divides her time between writing novels and teaching. She has written six adult books and four children’s books so far. Her novel *Douglass’ Women* won the American Book Award in 2003. Today, Rhodes is also the artistic director at the Virginia G. Piper Center for Creative Writing at Arizona State University.

Douglass to focus his narrative on the emasculation and the dehumanization endured by him – and by enslaved black men in general – and to implicitly emerge as an extraordinary man, who could regain his manhood thanks to his strong will and determination⁵⁵.

However, such a representation of passive black women is one of the possible interpretations of Douglass's experience, since the situations of oppression told by Douglass in his autobiographies can also be read from a different perspective. The author indeed does not fully recognize his aunt's and his mother's agency, for the two women react in an apparently passive way to their enslavement and to their masters' orders. Hester is continually whipped, however, because she keeps seeing the man she loves even though her master forbids her to hang out with him. Hester's determination to date her lover and disobey her master can be seen as a way to impose her will and affirm her freedom, which is – along with aforementioned ways of non-violent resistance – a sort of non-violent rebellion against the slaveholder. Douglass also fails to notice a similar resistance in his mother's behavior. About his mother he says:

She was hired by a Mr. Stewart, who lived about twelve miles from my home. She made her journeys to see me in the night, travelling the whole distance on foot, after the performance of her day's work. She was a field hand, and a whipping is the penalty of not being in the field at sunrise [...]. [...] She was with me in the night. She would lie down with me, and get me to sleep, but long before I waked she was gone. (Douglass 1993: 24-25)

After a touching description of his mother's efforts to maintain a bond with him, Douglass however cynically states that when she died he did not feel anything, for

⁵⁵ As I have already mentioned in the first part of my dissertation, Douglass shaped his identity in comparison to the white one: emerging as a determined and assertive man in his autobiography is Douglass's attempt to conform himself to Victorian standards of manhood. In order to do this, he chooses to adopt a male-centered angle to tell his own story by erasing all those aspects that could jeopardize his would-be social status, for instance him being helped to escape by a woman, i.e. Anna.

she was like a stranger to him. As for his aunt, Douglass once again does not acknowledge that even his mother possessed agency: she indeed refuses to give up on him by sacrificing her rest hours and by risking to be whipped just to hold him for a while. However, Douglass mentions en passant his mother's risky endeavor in his autobiography, as if walking miles after a whole day's work just to be with him were of little significance.

The reason why Douglass – unlike other black authors, such as Harriet Jacobs⁵⁶ – does not recognize female agency in his autobiography is that – as many other male leaders – his main aim is to establish his authority as a man and a leader. In order to do that he adopts in the *Narrative* a specific point of view to tell his own story, so that he can highlight on the one hand the oppression and the violence of slavery and on the other his self-determination in emerging from such a wretched situation. Indeed, he describes his way to freedom as a path that exclusively derived from his assertiveness and strong-willed behavior, i.e. he wants to show to the reader that he is a self-made man who entirely relied on his own strength to achieve freedom and become a free man. As a consequence, in Douglass's *Narrative* the author fails to acknowledge that he succeeds to escape thanks to Anna, a free black woman he will later marry. Douglass indeed mentions Anna out of the blue at the end of his autobiography by saying that she is a free woman and his “intended wife” (145). These are the only few words dedicated to Anna in Douglass's first autobiography

⁵⁶ On the contrary, female agency during slavery is very central in Harriet Jacobs's autobiography *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*, for the protagonist Linda Brent – a pseudonym adopted by Jacobs – reacts to Dr. Flint's sexual advances and tries to limit his agency. Indeed, Dr. Flint – the father of Linda's mistress – tries to seduce her without taking her by force. Linda is forbidden to marry the free black man she is in love with, so she takes a white lover who can also protect her. Unlike in Douglass's experience where the black community is completely absent, Jacobs does not build her identity in comparison to the white identity, because her model is her grandmother. Indeed, Jacobs's experience is focused on the black community and family, even though there is also the relationship with whiteness but it is created as a pretext to limit Dr. Flint's agency: Linda cannot do whatever she wants to but she can use her white lover as a strategy to oppose Flint's will.

and the reader feels a little puzzled in hearing that Douglass is going to marry, since so far he has never mentioned her in the narration. Then, Anna simply disappears from the narration: it is as if she had not been important in the process of Douglass's liberation from bondage, but in reality she was pivotal in helping him to escape North. For this reason, Jewell Parker Rhodes tries to give back to Anna the voice she has been deprived of in Douglass's autobiography by providing a parallel narration of Douglass's life, namely from a female perspective.

The whole book revolves indeed around Anna and Otilie, two women who deeply loved Douglass and devoted their whole lives to him. Anna Murray, a 28-year-old free black woman, meets 20-year-old Frederick in Baltimore, when he is still a slave. She helps him escape from bondage and they move to New Bedford (Massachusetts) for a new beginning together. They get married and soon after Anna gives birth to their first child, Rosetta. Then, Douglass starts to write articles and give lectures on the abolition of slavery and during a meeting he meets Otilie Assing, a white German woman who is helping William Lloyd Garrison in his abolitionist propaganda and will become Douglass's translator. Even though Anna bears Douglass five children and supports their family by working as a maid while he travels around the world spreading his abolitionist message, Douglass begins an adulterous relationship with Otilie, who accompanies him throughout England and Ireland.

Although Douglass's wife and mistress are real-life figures, Rhodes must resort to her imagination to shape the protagonists' inner lives and psyche. Indeed, the archives are almost silent about Douglass's private life and we do not know very much about Anna's and Otilie's existence. Consequently, since Anna has been

completely excluded from Douglass's narration and she has left very little direct information about herself, it is likely that Rhodes relies on Rosetta's memoirs *My Mother As I Recall Her* – published in 1900 – as well as on her imagination to mold Anna's character. For this reason, *Douglass' Women* falls into the genre of the neo-slave narrative⁵⁷, for Rhodes digs into Douglass's past and brings to light untold aspects and unspoken feelings, merging historical facts and the unknown interiority of Douglass's women thanks to her creativity and imagination. In addition to the recovery of the past, Rhodes's novel tries to change and rewrite narratives which over the years have become canonical and thus crystallized. As a consequence, *Douglass' Women* – which is less innovative than McBride's *The Good Lord Bird* from the stylistic point of view – ends up being an appealing novel because it removes from oblivion the stories of these women, who have disappeared from the collective memory although they had been central in shaping Douglass as a man. Indeed, Rhodes's aim is to make Douglass appear as a man with limits and flaws, rather than completely erasing his public and acknowledged reputation of fascinating thinker and upright leader.

In order to do that, Rhodes adopts the diary-style as a format for her novel, a strategy which allows Anna and Otilie to establish a close relation with the reader. Through their diaries, the two women share their joys and their pains with the audience: their untold stories present Douglass from an unusual point of view and let

⁵⁷ The term coined by Bernard Bell in 1986 refers to all those texts and cultural products – poems, movies, novels, etc. – that deal with the slave experience from a contemporary perspective. This genre is a sort of response to the gaps in the archives, it questions the objectivity of history and its aim is to find other means to reconstruct the past, i.e. through imagination. Unlike historical novels which provide an objective reconstruction of the past based on documents, the neo-slave narrative tries to bring to light what was silenced and in particular all those aspects of slavery that remained hidden for long time – interracial relationships, homosexuality, black people owning slaves – since in the historical archives we only have masters or white abolitionists talking about slavery but very little from the slaves themselves.

Douglass emerge as a flawed man, husband and lover, rather than Douglass as an irreprehensible leader. As a result, Rhodes brings to light Douglass's faults and weaknesses, which deeply affected the two protagonists, whose voices alternate in the narration. Rhodes's choice of switching between Anna's and Otilie's memories is pivotal in highlighting the deep antithesis between the two women, a strategy that I have decided to adopt in structuring the third chapter of my dissertation, too. The following paragraphs indeed counterpose Anna to Otilie in terms of different experiences, divergent backgrounds and contrary spheres they inhabit, so as to show the apparent incompatibility between the two women, who were forced to live under the same roof for about 12 years. Although they despise each other, they finally realize that their feelings for Douglass are something that brings them together, rather than divide them. As the narration proceeds, the initial hatred leaves room for solidarity between Anna and Otilie, who understand that Douglass failed to love them both and that they are more similar than they thought.

The end of the book shows how the final mutual support between Otilie and Anna is rooted in their womanhood: their deep diversity in skin color, backgrounds and ways of life is indeed evened out by the fact that they both are female subjects in a male-centered society. However, Rhodes's novel raises the issue of the double oppression experienced by black women, not only by whiteness, but also inside the black community: *Douglass's Women* explores the situation of discrimination of black women by black men through Anna's character, who must comply with his husband's decisions even if she does not agree. Black women had indeed to confront not only racism, but also the sexism intrinsic in the American society⁵⁸, black

⁵⁸ It should be remembered that Douglass was the only African American who took part in the first women's rights convention which took place in Seneca Falls (New York) in 1848. It is revealing that

community included. Even Douglass, who preached the equality between human beings, is shown by Rhodes as a sort of tyrant in the relationship with his wife: for instance, after some years spent alone with her children in a cottage in Lynn when Douglass toured Europe, Anna is threatened by her husband who promises that he will take their children away from her if she refuses to move back to Rochester. This event shows how Douglass adheres to the white idea of masculinity, according to which the man is the head of the family and the wife and children are subordinated to him. So, Douglass completely conforms to a male-centered society which oppresses women by asserting his right to decide of his children's future: indeed, the law gave to fathers the custody of the children in case of a separation of a married couple. This event exemplifies how fighting against sexism was not an issue for Douglass, for the central issues of his thought were racism, slavery and the subordination of blacks in the white society. Douglass indeed did not focus on sexism, on the contrary he adopted white standards of masculinity to assert his own manhood, even for what concerns the relationship man-woman⁵⁹.

feminists chose to invite an African-American man to a women's right conference, rather than asking a black woman to share her own experience of oppression as a female.

⁵⁹ This is exactly what happens in hip hop, the African-American music style par excellence. Hip hop music has always been characterized by homophobic and misogynistic lyrics and music videos. In hip hop culture, women are indeed reduced to objects and they are often referred to by means of a synecdoche, i.e. a part of the body – especially with a sexual connotation (for instance “booty” or “butt”). According to bell hooks, this is the result of racism and white oppression which have always tried – in particular during slavery – to diminish black males' selfhood and to deprive them of their patriarchal power. As a consequence, this situation has historically created in black males a tendency to confirm their own manhood by exercising their supremacy and oppression on black women. However, bell hooks asserts that “in the black community of [her] childhood, there was no monolithic standard of black masculinity. Though the patriarchal ideal was the most esteemed version of manhood, it was not the only version” (hooks 1992: 88), for alternative possibilities of black masculinity existed. Indeed, hooks mentions some men she used to know as examples of black men “who were not obsessed with being patriarchs” (88). hooks continues by saying that she “remember[s] them because they loved folks, especially women and children. They were caring and giving. They were black men who chose alternative lifestyles, who questioned the status quo, who shunned a ready made patriarchal identity and invented themselves” (88).

Over the last years, previously untouchable historical figures like Frederick Douglass have been revised and reinterpreted after gender inequalities within the black community have been brought to light through the novels of African-American female writers, such as Toni Morrison, Alice Walker and Octavia Butler: these authors took inspiration from the tradition of black women writers and feminists such as Harriet Jacobs, Sojourner Truth and Zora Neale Hurston, who laid the foundations for black feminism. Morrison, Walker and Butler go beyond the tradition of African-American writers who considered the acquisition of education and literacy skills the proof that blacks were human beings: these female writers prefer to focus on the recovery of black female culture through the revaluation of domesticity and at the same time they bring to light the subordinate condition of the black woman both outside and within the black community. As a consequence, their works have caused debate within the black community and they have also changed the self-awareness of black women.

The debate on double oppression and on the revaluation of domesticity has probably influenced Rhodes's gaze too, because she writes a gendered critique to Frederick Douglass's well-known story. The African-American female author gleans information and keys to write a novel which deals with Frederick Douglass from an innovative perspective, for she is able to fill the gaps in the archives by merging history with her imagination and her sensitivity as a woman so as to question the crystallized and fixed representation of the famous black hero, who in *Douglass' Women* leaves room for the man.

3.1.1 Domestic Arts vs. New Womanhood

As previously stated, *Douglass' Women* introduces first Anna Murray and then Otilie Assing as prototypes of different kinds of womanhood, which are for most of the book presented as in antithesis and thus incompatible. This dualism is first of all shown by the author through the description of their physical appearance and divergent backgrounds, which have been fundamental in building their identities and in shaping their own definition of womanhood.

Anna Murray is presented as a 28-year-old pitch-black woman, she is the daughter of two ex-slaves, although she hasn't experienced slavery directly because her parents were freed one month before her birth. She has never considered herself a beautiful woman, but she is determined to find someone who loves her as her father loved her mother. Anna remembers her childhood as a happy one: she spent all her days helping her mother doing household chores, learning how to run a house and to become the perfect wife for her future husband:

My happiest days were spent with Mam. She taught me to crimp pie crust, braise greens, stuff and lace a hen. She taught me how to clean sheets by adding a teaspoon of lye, how lemon juice made a window shine, how turkey feathers dusted finer than cotton. I never like sewing much but she taught me when a seam's been tugged to tight, when a hem has less than ninety stiches. (8)

From the list of activities that Anna used to do with her mother emerges that everything that Anna's mother taught her had to do with housekeeping: cooking, cleaning, dusting, sewing. So, Anna adheres to the idea of womanhood embodied by her mother, in which domestic culture plays a pivotal role. For an African-American woman, the notion of "home" was indeed deeply different from the oppressive feelings it aroused in white women, because although black and white women were both oppressed in a male-centered society, their situation was very different. If for

white middle-class women the house represented a trap they wanted to free themselves from, black women positively evaluated the house as the place where they could feel human beings again. According to bell hooks's essay *Homeplace (a site of resistance)* published in 1990,

Historically African-American people believed that the construction of a homeplace, however fragile and tenuous (the slave hut, the wooden shack), had a radical political dimension. Despite the brutal reality of racial apartheid, of domination, one's homeplace was the one site where one could freely confront the issue of humanization, where one could resist. Black women resisted by making homes where all black people could strive to be subjects, not objects, where we could be affirmed in our minds and hearts despite poverty, hardship, and deprivation, where we could restore to ourselves the dignity denied us in the outside in the public world. (hooks 1990: 384)

hooks's words underline the importance of home for the black community, because it represented a place where blacks did not "directly encounter white racist aggression" (hooks 1990: 388) both during slavery and after their emancipation. After having worked in the fields or in the houses owned by whites, black women longed for coming back home, where they could be themselves and affirm their blackness. For this reason, establishing a home has always been a revolutionary act against white oppression and homeplace became a "site of resistance and liberation struggle" (hooks 1990: 385). Even though sexism assigned women to the domestic sphere, black women

took this conventional role and expanded it to include caring for one another, for children, for black men, in ways that elevated our spirits, that kept us from despair, that taught some of us to be revolutionaries able to struggle for freedom. (hooks 1990: 385)

As a consequence, performing household activities and nurturing domestic arts takes on a different meaning for black women and for Anna too, who feels as a mistress, as a princess or a queen in her own house, for she twice describes both her childhood home and her later house in Lynn as her own kingdoms: "I loved my days

in the house. It was me and Mam's small kingdom" (8); "Our home be our small kingdom. I left it only for work. Or church" (171).

In addition to housekeeping, Anna has always been good at nursing people, according to what her mother said:

Since being little, Mam said I had a way with healing. I nursed all my brothers and sisters when they got spots, sore throats, gnashes in their limbs. Even nursed Mam when she had her last baby. Next to keeping house, I would've been pleased to heal people, there was that same sense of tidiness, of making things right. (27)

Along with those activities which belong to the domestic sphere, nursing has always been considered a female task – not only in hospitals but also in military camps during wars – so in the narration Anna is shown to master all the activities that have historically been performed by women.

Being able to take care of others and being devoted to home life are not only something that Anna is good at, but also a source of pride for her. For this reason, she is happy to work as a housekeeper for the Baldwin family in Baltimore, even though she starts to be a little absent-minded – and consequently scolded by Mrs. Baldwin – as soon as she falls in love with Frederick: "I, who prided myself on knowing everything about a house, top to bottom, did everything wrong" (18).

Anna's encounter with Frederick Douglass changes her life forever: she meets him on the Baltimore docks, for she sews, launders and does part-time jobs on her off-day to get an extra income, such as stitching sailor's suits, "soaking tobacco stains and spit, cleaning where stew crusted on sleeves and collars" (11). While on the docks, she sees an enslaved black man who is beaten by some white sailors and she helps him by dressing his wounds. She is so charmed by Douglass's physical appearance and bearing that she falls in love with him and she decides to help him

running away from his master, so they start to plan his escape. Once again Anna's skills and domestic mastery are fundamental in helping Douglass to improve his condition: "I made Freddy a seamen's outfit with my own hands. Sewed it with neat stitches and pressed it fine" (35). Thanks to the seamen suit tailored by Anna, Frederick succeeds in escaping to New Bedford where soon Anna – already pregnant of their first daughter Rosetta – reaches and marries him.

Even though in his narrative Douglass describes his escape North as exclusively depending on his strengths and ability, in reality Anna and her skills were pivotal in freeing him, which is an aspect that Douglass does not acknowledge also in Rhodes's novel. During one of the lectures that he starts to hold from his liberation, he says: "I found courage to escape slavery's wretched existence and sail to freedom. I will not tell you of the many that helped me. But the good Lord blesses them all" (67). Anna is disoriented by his statement because she wonders, "Who helped more than me? How come Freddy didn't mention me?" (67). Indeed, without Anna's help he probably would not have succeeded in his plan to reach Massachusetts. Although Anna is continually confused by Douglass's contradictory and ungrateful attitude, she keeps behaving as a loving wife and tries to do her best to take care of him, of their house and their family.

While in New Bedford Anna gives birth to Rosetta. Anna really yearned to become an affectionate mother and she hoped to have a girl to pass her down the domestic arts her mother had taught her: "My girl – it must be a girl, I wanted a girl – [...]. She'd learn gardening, how to make preserves, and how to turn a fine seam" (43). Although Rosetta learns to do domestic chores properly, she does not aspire to

become a perfect housewife and she eventually finds her way by deciding to start school, even though Anna suffers from Rosetta's decision to reject domestic culture.

In reading Anna's diary, the reader understands the importance that the black woman attaches on work and on manual activities. This is exemplified by a quotation⁶⁰ which introduces one of Anna's diary entries: "I only thought of *doing*, not speaking. Of sewing, cooking, caring for my children. Showing my love with my *hands*" (109) (italics mine). These words – told by Anna to Rosetta in 1882 – summarize Anna's idea of love: the almost obsessive repetition of the things she sews or cooks and of the household duties performed suggests that doing tangible things is the only way she knows of showing love to her husband and her family. Anna's quotation is followed by an excerpt of a speech Douglass made at the abolitionist convention held in 1853: "I will *speak* boldly against any evil. My voice shall carry far and wide" (109) (italics mine). Rhodes's choice of juxtaposing these quotations allows the reader to perceive Anna's and Douglass's different natures. Indeed, if Anna focuses her life on doing tangible activities, Douglass adopts an opposite strategy, for the quotation inserted by Rhodes stresses the black leader's ability to charm his audiences through his inspiring words, which end up being empty or harsh when used in the familial context.

What is more, doing household chores is for Anna not only a way to take care of the people she loves, but it also represents the way she can show the world that she is happy with her life: "I'd sew, cook, garden, put up preserves, and clean out house so lovely, that everyone would know I be a happy wife" (61).

⁶⁰ Whenever Rhodes switches narrator, she inserts two quotations which usually juxtapose Douglass's words with Anna's or Otilie's citations. For what concerns Douglass, his quotations are taken from heterogeneous sources such as letters or speeches made at conventions he attended. As for the two women, Anna's words are taken from Rosetta's memories whereas Otilie's quotations have been retrieved from her diary.

Of course, Anna thinks that taking care of her husband by cooking, gardening, quilting and sewing are part of her wifely duties⁶¹, but to her mastering minor arts means sticking to the values her family taught her and in general to the African-American tradition. Through Anna's character, Rhodes indeed brings to light these minor arts, which are part of black women's tradition, probably because the white feminist movement in many cases failed to notice their importance. Since feminists' aim was to get rid of patriarchal domination and of their subordinate role in society, their first step was to challenge the division of society into separate spheres of action and to campaign for equal opportunities for women in employment and education. For this reason, domesticity has often been considered by white middle class feminists the symbol of their oppression and the first thing to get rid of in their path to equality. However, they overlooked the relevant role that domesticity played in bequeathing traditions and values from generation to generation. As a consequence, they uprooted the heritage handed down by their foremothers in the name of an emancipated new kind of life.

The risk of wiping the slate clean and forgetting one's own past is exactly what Rhodes is fighting against in *Douglass' Women*. The author deals with the importance of domesticity in the black community through Anna's character and criticizes those fringes of the feminist movement which dismiss the importance of domestic life. Uprooting their mothers' customs means erasing part of their past and culture and black female writers such as Harriet Jacobs, Alice Walker and Jewell

⁶¹ The organization of gender roles in the black community reflected the structure of the white society, i.e. the model that blacks had to measure against during slavery: "Sex roles in the black slave-sub-culture mirrored those of patriarchal white America. Within the black slave sub-culture, it was the black female who cooked for the family, cleaned the hut or cabin, nursed the sick, washed and mended the clothes and cared for the needs of children. Black slave men regarded tasks like cooking, sewing, nursing and even minor farm labor as woman's work" (hooks 1990: 44). As a consequence, after the abolition of slavery black women occupied the same role that white women occupied within the family, i.e. subordinated to their husbands.

Parker Rhodes acknowledge the pivotal role that domestic arts played in shaping black womanhood. In her essay *In Search of Our Mothers' Gardens*, Alice Walker underlines the creativity of her foremothers, i.e. those black women who were denied the opportunity to be literate and thus to master the so called "major arts", that is poetry, sculpture, painting. However, this does not mean that they did not possess artistic skills or their own creativity, but they just channeled their ability into daily practices, which became their own expression of artistry, like for instance the tradition of quilting⁶². So, black women kept alive their creativity by inserting art in their daily practices, i.e. the only activities allowed to enslaved illiterate African-American women in the Jim Crow South. Walker recalls all the things that her mother made for her and her brothers: "She made all the clothes we wore, even my brothers' overalls. She made all the towels and sheets we used. She spent the summers canning vegetables and fruits. She spent the winter evenings making quilts enough to cover all our beds" (Walker 1972: 406). What is more, Walker's mother funneled her energies into gardening:

[...] my mother adorned with flowers whatever shabby house we were forced to live in. And not just your typical straggly country stand of zinnias, either. She planted ambitious gardens-and still does-with over fifty different varieties of plants that bloom profusely from early March until late November. Before she left home for the fields, she watered her flowers, chopped up the grass, and laid out new beds. When she returned from the fields she might divide clumps of bulbs, dig a cold pit, uproot and replant roses, or prune branches from her taller bushes or trees-until night came and it was too dark to see. (Walker 1972: 408)

Through her essay, Walker "unearths in her mother's gardening, quilting and other domestic arts a formerly unacknowledged African American female artistic tradition" (Zierler 2004: 110) by highlighting the fact that for black women being an

⁶² Quilting is indeed a theme which runs through all African-American literature as one of the main artistic expressions by black women, both during slavery and after its abolition. The ability to sew different kind of fabrics by juxtaposing vivid colors probably traces back to African roots since geometric patterns and contrasting colors are to be found in the textile tradition of Africa.

artist was part of their everyday life. For Walker's mother and in general for black women, performing these activities was not just a way to give vent to their creativity with the poor means at their disposal, but it also meant resisting white oppression and subjugation, which aimed at erasing their personality and at transforming them into flesh and labor force.

As previously stated, white feminists generally overlooked the importance of minor arts, so most of the time they accepted the erasure of domestic arts from the history of art, for they were not considered artistic expressions per se. In *Douglass' Women*, Otilie Assing embodies this kind of attitude towards housecraft and household arts, for she does not know or appreciate the activities Anna excels in. Born in Germany from a bourgeois family, Otilie spent all her childhood and adolescence in a wealthy and stimulating environment. Her father was a Jewish physician whereas her mother was a Christian ex-governess, who decided to devote her life to art and in particular to painting and poetry. Art is indeed very central in Otilie's world: her parents are idealists and esthetes, so their house is full of books, music and paintings and they often attend intellectual and artistic salons, where they meet poets and artists. The journeys Otilie and her family make during summers allow her to get acquainted with different customs and traditions as well as to master several foreign languages, a skill which will later allow Otilie's partnership with Douglass.

From the very beginning of Otilie's diary entries it is clear that she embodies a completely different kind of womanhood compared with the traditional values personified by Anna. In dealing with her childhood, Otilie thinks that she had been blessed to have had "two enlightened parents who didn't believe a girl was only fit

for sewing and bearing babies” (78). This statement completely reverses the perspective that Rhodes has adopted up to now in the narration: Otilie’s idea of womanhood deeply clashes with Anna’s, who indeed consecrates her whole life to her children and her family. The German woman has indeed ambitious plans for her future: “I am going to do great things. Travel to America. Become a great artist. A painter. Essayist. Journalist” (84). She indeed proves to be an independent woman for she travels alone in a ship headed for the US, where she has an interesting conversation with an American planter, Mr. Newcombe:

“My family built a plantation as rich and as civilized as any could claim in a wild land. My Papa and [the Captain’s] Papa before worked sunup to sundown to make paths, roads, sheds, barns, and houses. We made our own paradise.”

“What about the women?” I asked.

“They worked hard, too –”

I liked that answer.

“–worked until we were successful enough that they need not work. Southern beauties, belles, we call them. The pride of Virginia.”

“Do they get bored?”

“My, no. There are dances, teas, weddings, church socials. A host of things.”

(89)

This excerpt reveals Otilie’s disappointment in hearing that the women of the Newcombe family need not to work anymore because they have reached a well-off status, so now they can go back to the usual activities of upper class women, like the organization of social events. Moreover, Otilie is struck by Mr. Newcombe’s reply when she asks him about women’s education:

“What about education?”

“They oversee the domestic arts, of course. The raising of children. [...]

I became sadly disappointed in Virginia. [...] “God gave women minds to use.”

“Not all women are unhappy with their lot.” (89-90)

Otilie’s disappointment highlights her refusal to acquiesce in a male-centered society, which works according to separate spheres of action depending on gender. Moreover, her blunt answer “God gave women minds to use” once again implicitly

expresses Otilie's hostility towards a life devoted to domesticity and to domestic arts, which in her diary are constantly downgraded to minor activities that have nothing to do with art, for she believes that art includes just finer forms, such as painting and sculpture.

The conversation between Otilie and Mr. Newcombe lets Otilie's main passions emerge, i.e. work and art, which fill her own life. When she meets Douglass, she is charmed by him and she has the chance to help him in his fight for the abolition of slavery and at the same time to travel the world with him as his translator without giving up her career as a painter. While touring Europe with Douglass, Otilie falls in love with him, not only because Douglass is a handsome and beguiling man, but also because of his brilliant mind. From that moment on, Otilie becomes not only Douglass's lover, but also his spiritual companion, since she feels that their relationship is more than just sexual, it is a sort of spiritual union, i.e. a union of mind and body: "I was his companion of the mind (190)"; "We made love with our minds" (191). Since Otilie feels that their bond is unique, she keeps wondering why Douglass chose to marry Anna, who cannot live up to such a great leader, neither in terms of beauty, nor for what concerns intellectual skills. When Otilie sees Anna for the first time, her description of Douglass's wife is ruthless:

I saw the stark contrast between black skin and white silk. I was disappointed. Frau Douglass was short, thick in stature. She reminded me of a butcher's wife. (105) [...] They did not fit. Looking at her, my eyes settling on him, I could see the incongruity. Herr and Frau Douglass. They were not a good pair. No more than one would mate a dog to a cat, pair china with crockery, or sweet wine with sour borscht. Him tall; her, short; him, glowing with color and life; her dark and dull. Douglass was triumphant; yet his wife seemed to be grieving. (106)

The deep antithesis between the two women is further stressed by Otilie herself while speaking with Douglass about Anna:

“Is it true your wife cannot read?”

Douglass stiffened.

“Is she interested in anything other than domestic arts – cooking, cleaning, canning? Tell me, Douglass, is this the woman you dreamed of sharing your life? A peasant, is she not? Not well-bred at all.”

“Whereas you?”

“Very well-bred. The daughter of a physician and a teacher. I paint. I read. I write. Speak many languages. Read Greek. I understand the world of ideas.”

(160)

Here, the German woman explicitly compares her interests, background and skills to Anna’s domestic activities, by looking down on Douglass’s wife, who is described as a “peasant”. Indeed, Otilie feels superior to Anna for most of the novel, but she is so jealous of her that she steps out of her own ideals of freedom and says: “I tried not to think of Anna. She was unworthy of him. She should’ve been the slave. Whereas Douglass was never meant for field work, for manual labor of any kind. It wasn’t fair” (183). It is remarkable how Otilie always describes or refers to Anna with derogatory terms, which show her jealousy towards the African-American woman. What strikes the reader is that Otilie is very jealous of Anna even though she believes that the black woman cannot measure up to her. The German woman is indeed self-confident of her talents and skills, but while she’s with Douglass she is always comparing herself to Anna, so as to convince him (and probably herself, too) that she is better than Douglass’s wife.

For what concerns Anna, the African-American woman hates Otilie both because the German woman is her husband’s lover and because she thinks that Otilie is a woman with no morals. When they first meet, Anna describes Otilie by comparing their physical appearance: “I saw with my heart that this woman might harm my happiness. [...] This woman, except for her voice, be soft where I was hard, lean where I was too round. Her lips be thin and rosy, mine be thick and plum” (70).

However, it should be noted that even if Anna and Otilie share a mutual hatred, Anna does not behave like Douglass's lover by continually referring and comparing herself to her rival. First of all, although she despises Otilie, Anna considers her a beautiful woman⁶³ but she does not feel inferior to her, she just admits their dissimilarity: "I couldn't deny that she was beautiful. But I was beautiful, too. Just different" (335).

What is more, unlike Otilie, Anna rarely speaks of her rival in her diary entry when Otilie is not present. Indeed, Anna focuses her narration on her family and on her relationship with Douglass, even though she says: "not a day went by I didn't think of her" (170). Anna speaks of Otilie only when the two women are obliged by Douglass to live under the same roof in Rochester for 12 years. Indeed, their forced cohabitation is problematic both because of jealousy and because Anna experiences Otilie's presence as an intrusion not only in her life but also in her kingdom. Even though Anna strongly reacts to Otilie's presence in her house, Douglass does not change his mind and Anna is forced to submit to her husband's will. However, she decides the terms of Otilie's presence by forbidding her to enter in some parts of the house – the kitchen and the garden – and by preventing her contact with her children. Otilie accepts Anna's conditions, for she thinks that both of them got what they wanted: "We'd found a compromise that saved Douglass' reputation (I don't care about mine!) and one that Anna tolerates. Maybe she felt she had the better bargain: house and children. But she didn't have the nights of passion" (237). This solution allows Anna and Otilie to keep some kind of dignity, however it does not prevent inner turmoil and violent quarrels between them, in particular concerning Rosetta's

⁶³ Otilie embodies all the characteristics that made up beauty in the 19th-century American society: whiteness, blonde locks and blue eyes.

fascination for a woman who represents a completely different idea of womanhood. Otilie's literary skills and cultural background are indeed a whole new world for Rosetta, who has always followed the teachings of her mother, a proud African-American woman, whose rejection of literacy is one of the fundamental issues of the novel, as I will argue in the following paragraph.

3.1.2 Oral tradition vs. Literacy

The dualism oral tradition-literacy is a recurrent theme in *Douglass' Women* and one of the main features that distinguish Anna from Otilie. The novel indeed counterposes two types of knowledge: one is handed down through orality and has its roots in the oral tradition of Africa; the other is acquired thanks to one's reading and writing skills and it is typical of Western civilized countries. This dichotomy has permeated African-American literature from its very beginning, because it represents two different methods of acquiring knowledge, but also of passing on history, beliefs, customs and traditions from generation to generation. One of the first episodes in African-American literature which deals with the encounter between non-written and written tradition is to be found in Equiano's *Narrative*:

I had often seen my master and Dick employed in reading; and I had a great curiosity to talk to the books, as I thought they did; and so to learn how all things had a beginning: for that purpose I have often taken up a book, and have talked to it, and then put my ears to it, when alone, in hopes it would answer me; and I have been very much concerned when I found it remained silent.
(Equiano 1794: 69)

Equiano's "talking-book" episode focuses on his innocence and lack of familiarity in interpreting a tool which does not belong to his tradition, a tradition in which tales, feelings and moral values were transmitted through spoken words, without any kind of mediation. Indeed, "most African people did not invent an alphabet for the art of

reading and writing. Therefore they could not keep written records of their history. Instead they passed on information from one generation to another, by word of mouth” (Mbiti 1975: 4).

In *Douglass’ Women*, Anna sticks to this kind of tradition, i.e. the spirituality and the oral knowledge she inherited from her parents which goes back to her African heritage. Anna, as Rhodes says in the interview at the end of the book, “[is] deeply spiritual and praise[s] the connections between herself and her family and community” (365), as it is clear from her numerous references to “the bones”, i.e. the millions of Africans who died in the transatlantic crossing:

Sometimes slaves died in storms. Most times slave catchers chained them, pushed them overboard. When slaves too sick, when pirates chased them, when the British come, Captains shouted, “Dump cargo.” And all these women, babies, and men crashed down, drowning in the sea. Lungs exploded. Flesh eaten away. But their bones and souls still live at the sandy bottom. They say there be an army of twenty million. An army that can’t be killed. Skeletons, hard and strong. Souls that blend invisible with water. When Frederick travels by sea, I tell him, “Never fear.” Bones be keeping him safe. He don’t believe me. (5)

This passage reveals how much Anna relies on a spirituality that goes back to her past and how she feels part of that community. In important moments of her life, she indeed remembers her ancestors, for example every time she discovers that she is pregnant – “New life was swimming in me like the bones were swimming in the sea” (43) – and when she gives birth to Rosetta alone at home: “The bones would provide for her just as they did for me. The bones be happy she alive. [...] Before I fell asleep, before I let myself rest, I thanked my Mam. Thanked the bones too” (117). Moreover, when Douglass crosses the Atlantic to go to Europe, Anna thinks “that the bones would keep him safe as he crossed the water” (167) and she thanks the spirits

of her forefathers when her husband comes home safe and sound: “I wiped my eyes. Blessed day. I whispered a prayer to the bones” (203).

However, Anna is not supported by her husband, who has a problematic relationship with his heritage and defines her words as nonsense:

- “I’ll ask for the bones to help.”
 - “Superstition, Anna.”
- I frowned. (125)

Douglass, who looks up to whiteness, shows no interest not only in Anna’s beliefs, but also in everything that happens in her life, for he is too self-centered and focused on his career. This is evident when he tries to convince her to move to Washington when Lincoln wins the elections in 1860:

- “We’re moving to Washington, Anna. I’ve already found our new home.”
- “I don’t understand.”
- “Our new home.”
- “This my home.”
- “Cedar Hill. You’ll like it, Anna. I promise you. Right in the head of our government. I’ll make headway with representatives and senators. Match my wits with them and win. [...] It’s near Baltimore, Talbot County. You can visit your Mam.”
- “She’s dead. I told you so.” He looked away, flushed.
- “Yes, I’m sorry.” He stooped, both hands on my knees. “You’ll be nearer to the shore. Near those bones you’ve told me about.” (330-331)

This passage shows how Douglass takes advantage of Anna’s beliefs and feelings to reach his goals, without really taking care of what she thinks or feels. Douglass’s uncaring attitude towards his wife’s needs and desires is a trend which runs through the whole novel and it is particularly evident whenever he uproots Anna from her friends and the community she lives in because of his personal ambitions. Being part of a community is really important for Anna, i.e. for a woman who is alone with her children for most of the time covered by the novel, but once again Douglass proves to be uncaring or unaware of a woman’s heart. Douglass does not ask Anna’s opinion

and simply orders her to pack, otherwise he would take away their children from her. He knows that Anna will not give up on her children, so he is sure that she will always follow him wherever he goes. If Anna cannot go against her husband for what concerns moving from one city to another, she can however take position against him by refusing to learn to read and write.

The novel tries to disclose the mystery behind Anna's choice to reject literacy, by showing her path to self-awareness. Indeed, when Anna is just a girl, she refuses to go to school probably because of her strong attachment to her family and to her mother, who bequeathed to her all the knowledge she thinks she needs. During her childhood, Anna does not feel the urge to learn to read and write, because she sticks to the black tradition passed down by her family. However, Anna does not explain clearly in the narration why she refused to go to school and learn to read and write, even though in hindsight she realizes that she should have accepted her mother's suggestion to attend school: "If I'd knowed how much Frederick was going to hold it against me, I would've said different" (7). Douglass indeed encourages Anna to learn to read and write, because he believes in the emancipatory power of literacy: "He say reading 'freed him.' 'Reading is the only way to light the corners of the mind'" (7). Nevertheless, after few lines, Anna puts into question Douglass's firm belief, for she acknowledges that she played a crucial role in freeing her husband, both physically and psychologically. She indeed asserts: "Freddy thinks reading [...] free him. But I freed him. Me and my bones. We made a harbor. A place to ease his body down" (9). So, not only has Anna made Douglass's escape possible, but she also freed him in broader terms, for she took care of him and loved him. As a consequence, she

acknowledges the emancipatory power of love, rather than the effectiveness of literacy as a factor which leads to enfranchisement.

Throughout her life, Anna firmly rejects literacy in spite of Douglass's urgings to become a literate woman, although when she meets Douglass she nearly changes her mind and she is willing to learn. Anna takes this decision after having experienced the problems of being illiterate in a literate society. For instance, the black woman must resort to a Penny-letter-man – a sort of postman who was paid to deliver spoken messages for those who could not write or read – to communicate with her mother, who lives in Maryland. Anna is not happy about this solution because most of the time the Penny-man does not deliver a complete message and she is forced to give him an extra coin and send him back to her mother for further information. Indeed, such a communication medium has many disadvantages: for example the message delivered could differ from the original one and privacy is not respected at all.

A second major problem presents itself after Douglass's escape, when Anna keeps waiting for her lover's news for many weeks. One morning she finally receives a letter, which she cannot read. Anna is at the Baldwins' and she cannot leave work in order to find someone who can disclose the content of the letter. So, she is forced to wait until evening, when she goes at the preacher's house: "Preacher could read. But I couldn't get to him 'til my chores were done. Lord, six weeks I'd waited, and the truth was in my hand and still I had to wait. I swore I'd learn reading. I didn't want to feel this way again" (44). These negative experiences – along with Douglass's vow "I'll teach you to read. When we're free, I'll teach you" (33) – push Anna to make an effort and she finally resolves to learn to read and write.

Nonetheless, things do not go as planned. After their marriage, Douglass starts to hold lectures throughout the US and Europe, so most of the time Anna is alone at home during the day, she has to raise her children, do domestic chores and even work in order to scrape out a living: “I had no time for letters, I thought. There be laundry to do. Cooking, cleaning” (133); “When I wanted to learn reading and writing, there was no time. Freddy gone most times. Me alone in a cold house” (7-8). Douglass turns out to be insensitive and unsympathetic towards Anna, because whenever he comes back home from his journeys, he scolds her for her grammatically incorrect sentences. Anna indeed sticks to the African-American Vernacular English, whereas Douglass thinks that the wife of an important black leader should speak proper American English, especially in public. For this reason, Anna tries to speak correct English whenever someone knocks at her door looking for Douglass: “‘He is not here,’ I say. Freddy strongly told me not to say ‘ain’t.’ ‘He *ain’t* here, isn’t good English,’ Freddy said” (113).

In *Douglass’ Women*, the black leader is indeed represented as a man who pays excessive attention to the exterior and to what other people think about him and his family. This is sustained by the fact that Anna acknowledges that before becoming a black leader Douglass did not mind Anna’s poor linguistic skills, but as soon as he becomes a leading spokesman of blacks’ rights, he constantly reminds her of her linguistic lacks: “Freddy didn’t mind my not reading. But it bothered Frederick Bailey Douglass, the ex-slave man” (7). What is more, Douglass is annoyed by the fact that since Anna is illiterate, she cannot teach his children to read and write:

Sabbath evening, he said, “Today, Anna, we begin again. Frederick Junior is inside you. My son must read and write.”

“I’ll send him to Pastor’s school.”

“And how will you know if Pastor teaches him right? What about that, Anna?”

On a small chalkboard, Freddy made me draw uppercase, “I,” and lowercase, “i.” I frustrated him because I asked, too many questions, like why have upper and lower? Words would always say the same thing. He said, “It’s grammar.” But I thought a word be a word... be a word. Whether it be tall or small. (133)

This passage shows Anna’s efforts to be part of a society she does not belong to and that she does not want to be part of, since her oral tradition continually leaks through her thoughts. Indeed, even if she tries to learn the “nonsense marks” (211) written by her husband, she eventually refuses literacy.

As a proud African-American woman, Anna rejects literacy probably because she wants to stick to the values of her own tradition: embracing literacy would mean betraying the cultural heritage left by her mother and her ancestors and as a consequence her identity. Even though she is illiterate, Anna does not feel inferior to Douglass or Otilie, because she is proud of her African descent and oral tradition. There is indeed a dimension of fullness in Anna’s life due to the fact that she positively evaluates blackness and black tradition, similar to what emerges from Harriet Jacobs’s autobiography (see chapter 1.3). Both Anna and Harriet Jacobs do not refuse the value of literacy per se, however they question the idea that literacy is the prerequisite that makes them (free) subject. Indeed, they react against the idea that humanity and emancipation come exclusively from literacy, as if they were less human without it. In *Douglass’ Women*, Anna becomes aware of her value as a woman as the narration proceeds and she even tries to learn to read and write. However, when she understands that Douglass uses literacy as a measure of humanity, she changes her mind. Thus, Anna’s denial of literacy as emancipatory strategy turns out to be more than just fear of failure or disinterest. Anna consciously refuses to learn to read and write at a certain point in the narration as a way to defy and resist her husband by validating another type of culture and knowledge, which

for Douglass and Otilie does not exist. So, rejecting literacy means for Anna making a stand against her husband, who wants to change her way of being because he has become a well-known and respectable African-American leader and he does not want to be embarrassed by an illiterate wife. Douglass's strategy is to conform to whiteness and acquiring literacy is part of the process: "white people are our model. If colored people propose to advance, we must show all whites, we, too, are cultured, respectable" (59). Anna does not understand Douglass's point since she wonders: "I was good enough when we married, why wasn't I good enough after? [...] It was Freddy, not Frederick who met me in bed. So, I felt no need to read" (7). Anna's words reflect her assertiveness in sticking to her identity and at the same time she challenges Douglass's overvaluation of whiteness and his adhesion to white dominant values as a way to prove the advancement of the black community.

What is more, Anna's refusal of literacy can be considered a sort of rebellion against her husband's infidelity: in the final interview, Rhodes asserts that "divorce was out of the question for Anna – society would have ostracized her; she would have lost legal claim to her children and to any marital property" (354). So, Anna, who does not want to give up on her children, has no other choice but to remain with Douglass, even though she proves not to be a compliant woman for she exercises some kind of agency by refusing literacy. Anna's rebellious act is similar to what Douglass's aunt and his mother did during enslavement: even though in different contexts, the three women try to assert their own agency, something that Otilie – the emancipated feminist – is not able to do.

Although "white women always had more freedom than a colored gal" (170) as Anna states, Otilie ends up being more subjugated than Anna in the relationship

with Douglass. The German woman risks everything for love: she ruins her own reputation because in the 1850s a woman who lived together with a man – especially black – without being married was considered a prostitute and thus an outsider. Otilie embodies the alternative woman who sacrifices her good name in the name of love by going against the precepts of the true womanhood because she believes in “free love”. However, having been Douglass’ lover for almost 28 years, she aspires to a lifetime commitment with him, but the black leader does not leave his wife, especially after 1860, when Anna and Douglass’s fifth child Annie dies at the age of 10. Otilie is heartbroken because of Douglass’s sudden indifference and because of rumors of his adulterous relationship with the British abolitionist Julia Griffiths. This unbearable pain pushes Otilie to raise doubts concerning the implications of literacy for the first time in the narration. The German woman indeed has never questioned the importance of literacy, on the contrary she has always been proud of her erudite literary and artistic background, but while experiencing Douglass’s disinterest she wonders: “I wondered if Anna’s illiteracy meant she experienced less pain than I?” (303). Through this question, Rhodes’s casts a shadow on Otilie’s capability to empathize with other women and human beings, for it seems that Otilie’s literacy and participation to the liberal world do not allow her to notice that Anna is suffering, too. However, the whole novel works against the idea that Anna does not feel pain because she is not as erudite as Otilie: indeed, the novel emphasizes how even though the two women share the same painful love experience, they react in different ways to their condition. Anna is an independent woman with a full life: even though she is married to Douglass, she does not hinge her life on her relationship with her husband, for she has children, she succeeds in making friends in

every city she moves to and she tries to find a community she can rely on. On the other hand, Otilie is obsessed by her affair with Douglass and focuses her entire existence on this relationship: not only does she find herself relegated to the purpose of physical satisfaction and solidarity in his work, but she also financially supports him for years in printing his newspapers *The North Star* and *Frederick Douglass' Paper*⁶⁴. So, Otilie finds herself trapped by her boundless love towards a man who suddenly abandons her after a three-decades-long relationship and when she reads from a newspaper that he has just remarried⁶⁵ after Anna's death, she realizes that she has nothing to live for and she commits suicide by drowning in the Seine. As Rhodes states at the end of the novel, "Otilie was a vibrant woman, ahead of her time in many ways; unfortunately, love enslaved her and blinded her to self-survival" (362) and that's exactly what differentiates her from Anna: "Anna survives by being Anna; Otilie dies because without Douglass, she felt herself incomplete" (362).

3.1.3 Mother – Daughter Relationship

The tensions between Anna and Otilie worsen when the two women are forced by Douglass to live under the same roof in Rochester. This period represents for Anna a threat to her happiness and to her family, whereas Otilie does not feel uncomfortable in sharing Anna and Douglass's house, because she is focused on her relationship with Frederick. Indeed, the black leader spends the night in Otilie's bed,

⁶⁴ The fact that Otilie gives money to Douglass to help him print his newspapers casts a shadow on the effective freedom achieved by the new woman. Indeed, even though Otilie downgrades old womanhood in the name of a progressive idea of being a woman in the 19th century, she herself does not benefit of male privileges, for instance the access to the political sphere. Otilie stays at the fringes of the political world given that her position is always mediated because she cannot speak directly. As a consequence, she ends up being a sort of servant or helper in Douglass's abolitionist cause, so she is not as emancipated as she thinks she is.

⁶⁵ In 1884, Douglass married a white woman 20 years his junior, Helen Pitts, after only a year from Anna's death. Helen Pitts was a teacher and a feminist, who worked for Douglass as a secretary, too.

but – in order not to be discovered by his children – he gets up at dawn and leaves the room through the door which connects Otilie’s room with Anna’s.

The period the two women are forced to spend together represents the moment in which their two ideas of womanhood collide and even though Anna forbids Otilie to enter her kingdom – namely the kitchen, the garden and her children’s rooms – she cannot prevent Otilie from entering her life and wreaking havoc on her world. Indeed, Anna’s attempt to protect her children from Otilie’s influence fails, in particular for what concerns Rosetta’s destiny.

Dougllass’s firstborn is indeed fascinated by Otilie. The German woman embodies a completely different kind of womanhood, a broader one compared with Anna’s. At first, Rosetta is attracted by Otilie’s beauty and sneaks in the white woman’s room to peek at her:

- “Who’s there?” I heard scraping. [...] If it was Anna, I was going to scream.
[...] “Who disturbs me?”

I saw children’s shoes at the bottom of the curtain. [...] Rosetta stepped forward.

- “You’re a pretty thing.” And she was, too. Darker-skinned like her mother. But her eyes were intelligent like her father’s. Her hair, though coarser than Dougllass’, fell in great waves, framing her face and thin nose.

- “You’re pretty, too” The girl puckered her lips. [...]

- “Does your mother know you’re here?”

She shook her head.

- “What are you doing, then?”

- “I wanted to see if you were as pretty as I remembered. [...] I like your hair.”

(238)

In spite of the fact that Otilie hates Anna, she behaves kindly with Rosetta because she understands that the girl is very smart. The adversative sentence Otilie uses in describing Rosetta – “but her eyes were intelligent like her father’s – implies once again a judgment towards Anna, whose illiteracy is constantly reminded to the reader by Otilie’s words and allusions.

The white woman asks Rosetta if she would help her brush her hair and the little girl is happy to do it. This moment allows Otilie to talk with the black girl about education and school:

- "Do you go to school?"
- "No, ma'am."
- "A smart girl like you should be at school. Or do you have a governess? No, of course not. Douglass is not yet rich. [...] My mother was a governess, [...] she believed in learning."
- "Did she teach you?"
- "Yes she did."
- "In Lynn, the Pastor taught me."
- "Taught."
- "The Pastor taught me."
- "No one here?"
- "No." (239)

Then, Otilie asks Rosetta if she can write her name and age. Rosetta can write just few words, but she shows determination in learning to be able to read her father's books. On the one hand Otilie praises her resolution, but on the other she gets angry because Anna does not allow her daughter to go to school and forces her to live in a narrow-minded environment. After having brushed her hair, Rosetta indeed explains to Otilie why they should burn the strand of her hair which remained caught in the bristles of her brush: "Mam say, 'If a bird makes a nest with your hair, your hair will fall right out'" (239). At first, the German woman thinks that the girl is joking, but she suddenly realizes from Rosetta's facial expression that she is serious, so she "felt angry that such superstition filled her head" (239). The conversation with Rosetta is a sort of revelation for Otilie, who decides to save the black girl and emancipate her from her mother's absurd beliefs and practices: "What a charming child. I had to rescue her. Her life would surely be blunted if her head was filled with nonsense, old wives' tales. What must it be like to live in a house with her mother all day, day after day?" (239). Once again, Anna's tradition is indirectly downgraded by Otilie, who

as a feminist cannot let an intelligent girl being wasted by such nonsensical theories.

So, Douglass's lover whispers to Rosetta:

- "Would you like to go to school?"
- "Couldn't you teach me?"
- "I could. Painting. Reading. Writing. Even German, if you wish. I could teach you about all the great thoughts men have had. Some women, too. I could teach you more than many a tutor. A new world dawns, Rosetta. We need intelligent minds. Intelligent women." (240)

From this moment on, Otilie fails to keep the pact she and Anna had made when the German woman moved to Douglass's house, for she starts to spend a lot of time with Rosetta teaching her to read and to write and preparing her for school.

When Anna finds out that Otilie is teaching Rosetta and that Douglass wants to send her to school, the black woman gets very angry at Douglass and her mistress. Anna has a heated argument with her husband, for she does not want to part from Rosetta as well as that her daughter spends so much time with a woman without any kind of morality. Anna's judgments towards Otilie emerge during the fight with Douglass, who asserts his paternal rights and is determined to give his children a formal education, i.e. something which Anna is not able to give to Rosetta:

- "You're ignoring the subject of Rosetta's education."
- "I'm not. I taught her, be teaching her all the wonders Mam taught me. She can sew, cook, garden. She be doing right well."
- "Have you taught her Plato, the text of my books, how to write a letter? [...] Have you given her anything to think about other than your small domestic arts?" [...]
- "I be teaching –"
- "*Be* teaching? What kind of English is that?"
- "I be teaching –"
- "Who are you to teach anyone?" [...]
- "I *be* teaching Rosetta to be good, God-fearing woman. At seven, she be smarter than Miz Assing. At seven, she know it be wrong to lust after another woman's husband. To commit adultery. To sin against the Bible." (247)

Through the use of black English, Anna shows her refusal of literacy as a way to go against her husband: the fact that she repeats “I be teaching”⁶⁶ even after Douglass’s correction highlights her rejection of white standards, which are embodied by Otilie. Moreover, the excerpt shows that not only Otilie but also Douglass downgrades the domestic arts Anna excels in, which are very part of her tradition and of blackness in general. Douglass proves once again to overrate whiteness and debase blackness by asserting that his daughter deserves a fine education because “the future for the colored race lies in being as prepared as any educated white” (245).

The argument goes on by intertwining Douglass’s concern for Rosetta’s future and Anna’s resentment towards a selfish husband, who betrays her and shows no understanding and respect for his pregnant wife:

- “Look at you Anna,” he said softly, his voice drawn out to a hoarse whisper. “Look at Miss Assing.”
- I clutched my belly, feeling pain rush through me. I pounded my fists on his thighs.
- “Did you think I be ugly when you made this child? Or Freddy Junior? Rosetta? Did you think me ugly when I offered to buy you free? Was I ugly then? When I gave you all my money to run free?”
- “No.” He stood, glaring at me. “You looked well enough. It’s the ugliness of your mind that punished me. You’re an embarrassment, Anna. Barely more educated than when I found you.”
- “Whose fault? When you been here to teach me?”
- “You could’ve continued on your own.”
- “When? When I needed to provide food, money, and warmth for our children? When I needed to take your role as father and head? [...]”
- [...]
- “Rosetta will go to boarding school.”
- “Go to Miz Assing. Leave Rosetta here.”
- “She’ll go to boarding school.”
- “Book-smart mean nothing. You write books, and still don’t care you breaking God’s law.”
- “[...] Miss Assing is a companion of the mind and soul. If you offered more, I would gladly take it, Anna. But you don’t.” (248)

⁶⁶ To show Anna’s determination in following her own ideas and not to accept Douglass’s corrections, Rhodes italicizes the verb “be” in Anna’s third repetition of the sentence “I be teaching”, which corresponds to a stressed pronunciation in an oral dialogue.

At this point of the narration, Anna understands that Douglass has never loved her, for Frederick states that he married her because of loyalty, so Anna clings on to the most important people in her life: her children. She does not want Rosetta to leave her and go to the boarding school to such an extent that for the first time Anna pushes Douglass away from her and encourages him to go to his lover.

Although Anna is ready to fight for her daughter, she eventually decides to let her go because Rosetta really yearns to go to school:

- "I want to go to school." [...]
 - "We can find a Pastor to teach you, like in Lynn."
 - "Miss Assing says I need the best learning. Everybody in the world knows me as Frederick Douglass's girl. [...] Can I go to school?"
- I shuddered. "That what you want?"
- "Yes, ma'am."
 - "You don't want to help with your new baby brother?"
 - "He won't be a baby long. And I'm growing up. (251)

Anna is really upset by Rosetta's words and she cannot even speak: "Didn't say anything when I cried and cried. But, in my fierce hug, my kisses, my caress of her back and hair, I knew she could feel my body saying what my mouth couldn't. 'Yes'" (251). Even though Anna tries to ask Rosetta to help her raising her little brother, Rosetta's answer highlights the importance she will give to education and literacy from this moment on. Indeed, whenever Rosetta comes home during the holidays she shows no interest in doing the domestic chores she performed before, as Anna states: "Rosetta, once she got a taste of school, had no patience for housekeeping" (327). Indeed, thanks to school Rosetta gets acquainted with a broader social environment, which allows her to learn many things and to make connections. On the contrary, domestic arts are performed inside the house, a space which is now too small for Rosetta, who has known that outside her house there is a whole new world to discover. However, when Rosetta is at home, she helps her

mother in cleaning the house and taking care of her brothers, so she succeeds in keeping a close relationship with Anna, for she does not betray her mother and her values. Nevertheless, Rosetta acknowledges the importance that Otilie had in her life. To stress Rosetta's gratitude to Otilie, Rhodes inserts before one of Otilie's diary entries a quotation taken from letter Rosetta wrote to Otilie in 1883: "You were another kind of mother locked inside my head. Mam had my heart" (255). Through this statement Rosetta highlights how the two women who raised her were pivotal in shaping her as a complete person: on the one hand, Anna cherished her and showed her the meaning of love; on the other, Otilie was crucial in opening her mind and in expanding her horizons.

The bond between Otilie and Rosetta also lays the foundations for a solidarity feeling between Otilie and Anna. Spending time with Rosetta allows the German woman to acknowledge and respect Anna's motherhood: "I'd seen Anna reach decisions about her children before. She never failed to do what's best. I give her that" (258). For the first time in the narration, Otilie says praising words to Anna and from this moment Douglass's mistress starts to realize how he has always been unjust with his wife, whose attempts to be a good mother and a good companion go completely unnoticed. For instance, before Rosetta's departure for the boarding school, Otilie buys her some new clothes:

[Rosetta] lifted the dress as though they were precious gold. "My first store-bought clothes. Store-bought dresses." [...] Anna came to clear the tea. I saw her dismay before she veiled her expression.

I should've known Anna would make Rosetta's new gowns. Wasn't she always cutting patterns, sewing as June gave way to July, then August? Some nights, she practically hurried dinner so she could put out her basket, thread a needle and stitch. How thoughtless I'd been.

Rosetta was bubbling with laughter. "Aren't they pretty?" Anna hugged her. "Yes, they pretty," she said, then looked at me.

I stood, nearly upsetting the tea cart. "I'm sorry, Anna."

“For what?” asked Douglass. “Your gifts are lovely and generous.”
Anna and I looked at each other. My gaze fell first. (259)

As soon as Otilie sees Anna’s dismay, she realizes her mistake. On the contrary, Douglass does not understand why Otilie should be sorry for having bought new dresses to his daughter, by proving to be careless of Anna’s feelings.

What is more, Otilie notices Douglass’s heedlessness towards Anna also during the trip to Miss Seward’s Academy for Ladies in Albany, Rosetta’s new school. Anna is going to give birth to her fifth child and she is forced to stay at home, so Otilie and Douglass go with Rosetta to Albany. When they arrive, Rosetta is nervous and repeats the words her mother said to her before her departure: “Mam say, ‘Don’t get lost in the wilderness. Don’t get lost. Don’t get lost in the wilderness’” (261). While Douglass does not try to comfort her daughter and just says that Anna’s words are meaningless, Otilie consoles the girl and praises Anna for the second time in the narration:

- “What does your mother say you should do? To keep from getting lost?”
- “Remember I’m loved.”
- “That’s good advice. Your mother is a wise woman. Remember you’re loved.”
(161)

In this occasion, Otilie shows more sensitivity than Douglass, who proves to be just focused on exteriority and concerned about what other people think of him. Indeed, the headmistress of the school does not treat kindly Rosetta, for she is darker than Douglass. However, the black leader does not notice it and he seems to be in a hurry to leave Rosetta, so he kisses her and says: “Don’t embarrass me” (262). This sentence is heard by Otilie, who is trying to dissuade Douglass from leaving his daughter there, for it seems that Miss Seward’s Academy is not the right place for Rosetta. However, Douglass just worries about his name and his reputation, so he

repeats again “Don’t embarrass Father” (263) and goes out the door. On the contrary, Otilie feels bad about leaving the little girl, but she cannot go against Douglass’s will. So, the German woman repeats the words Anna told to Rosetta: “Don’t get lost in the wilderness. [...] Remember that your Mam loves you” (263). The fact that Otilie uses the same words used by Anna shows that the two women, who at the beginning of the novel seem to be parallel lines running next to each other but never crossing, finds an intersection point thanks to their bond with Rosetta. From this moment on, Otilie starts to notice and emphasize Douglass’s flaws as a partner, husband and father and this episode brings Otilie closer to Anna and to her suffering. As a consequence, Otilie understands towards the end of the novel that her hatred towards Anna is unfounded. To stress Otilie’s new awareness, Rhodes inserts a quotation by Otilie from a letter she wrote in 1874 where she asserts: “I shouldn’t have hated her. She loved him just like me” (215).

The two women share indeed the same role of physical satisfaction for the black leader, but he probably really does not care for any of them. Even when Douglass seems to be thoughtful towards Anna, he proves that he has a hidden motive. For instance, Douglass accepts that Annie, his fifth child, stays at home with Anna, who is seriously ill. Anna is happy to have Annie for she can finally teach someone what her mother taught her:

I told Freddy he could do what he wanted with the other children. But Annie, my late-in-life child, I’d school as Mam schooled me. I insisted Pastor teach her letters. Freddy thought I didn’t understand the importance of learning. But I did. My children lived in a different world. With Rosetta gone, the boys at school, making mischief like boys do, me and Annie made a pair. We sang spirituals. She read me the Bible. We cooked. Gardened. Told each other tales. [...] Annie was always up under me. Curious. Wanting to know how to make fancy cakes, not plain cakes, how to snip flowers and feed them syrup-water to make them last longer. How to starch curtains so they flapped like angel’s wings. How to make a seed ball for birds to eat in winter.” (293-294)

All the aspirations Anna had for Rosetta are thus projected onto Annie, whose curiosity for domestic arts and activities is similar to her mother's interest in domestic chores. Unfortunately, Annie gets ill and dies when she is only 10 years old. Anne is devastated and loses interest in everything. Douglass suggests Anna they move to Washington, in order to be closer to her mother and to the sea, where the bones Anna is always talking about lie. In reality, Douglass is not trying to cheer Anna up, but he wants to move because in Washington he can continue his work as an abolitionist and can meet important politicians and senators. Anna, who has nothing to live for, accepts to move to Washington and asks Douglass about Otilie. Douglass answers that there is no room for Otilie in the new house. In her diary entry Anna recalls: "And I surprised myself by feeling almost sorry for Miz Assing. Freddy done said good-bye. Flat. Done gone. She'd a taste of my bitter medicine" (332). Through this statement, Anna indirectly acknowledges that Douglass used Otilie as he pleased and that both of them were treated by him in the same way.

Some days after, the two women disclose their feelings for Douglass, when Otilie goes to Anna's house in Rochester. Douglass is not at home, so they can have a sincere conversation about him. Anna feels compassion for Otilie because her love for Douglass became a sort of obsession: since Douglass has left her, she is haunted by his memory and she confesses to Anna that she does not know if Douglass ever loved her and this doubt is consuming her. Anna feels sorry for the German woman:

Miz Assing, with all her book-learning, was worse off than me. I was free. She be chained by love. Locked in a jail, not knowing whether Freddy'd ever let her out. Worse, she came to America to free the slaves and became herself enslaved. By a great man. The great abolitionist. But he just a man. (339)

The conversation between Douglass's women represents the climax of the novel, since Anna and Otilie, who have competed with each other for about 30 years to get

Douglass's love, understand that they have been fighting for a losing battle: Douglass has never learned to love anyone but himself.

In *Douglass' Women*, Frederick Douglass seems to confirm the idea that the new womanhood embodied by Otilie is the prototype of woman who suits best an exceptional man like him. However, the novel goes against this idea and questions the binary contraposition between a woman focused on the house and on the family – and thus conservative and regressive – and an educated and open-minded woman. As previously stated, Anna dies because of a paralyzing stroke, whereas Otilie commits suicide because her lover left her and married another woman. Before killing herself, Otilie leaves a note where she leaves her estate to Douglass and her letters and diaries to Rosetta. So, Otilie thinks of Douglass even before this desperate act, which signals the fact that she is not able to set herself free from the love she feels. For this reason, the real heroine of the novel is Anna, who survives all the pain that Douglass inflicted on her. During the narration she becomes more and more self-aware of her values and talents, so she does not question her value as a woman. On the contrary, Anna's character is instrumental for Rhodes in casting a shadow on the progressive idea of womanhood, for the author wants to reevaluate the culture of women that white feminists did not consider important and implicitly labeled as inferior. As a consequence, getting rid of old womanhood means to confirm the idea of a society which puts men and male values in first place.

What is more, the dichotomy between literacy and illiteracy, which is very central in *Douglass' Women*, ends up being a contraposition between whiteness and blackness. Through Rhodes's interpretation, the author emphasizes Douglass's

fascination for whiteness by implicitly stressing Douglass's tendency to downgrade blackness. Actually, Douglass has a problematic relationship with his blackness: he is proud to be black, but he look up to white standards he wants to conform to, for he thinks that following white values is the only way to be accepted as an equal and respectable man.

CONCLUSIONS

As I tried to demonstrate in my work, although Frederick Douglass is still considered a prominent spokesman of the American heritage, today's novelists are challenging the crystallized iconic self-representation that Douglass created through his work to investigate what has gone on behind the scenes. If previous representations relied on Douglass's words, contemporary revisions of his persona tend to focus on what he did not take into account – or skipped on purpose – in his *Narrative*: these authors bring to light what has gone on behind the scenes and reinterpret Douglass's story, so as to let his human side emerge, rather than the sacred aura often ascribed to him.

In particular, the focus of these revisions is on Douglass's personality and sexual politics, even though each author chooses to adopt a specific stylistic approach. It is possible to recognize a common thread among the revisions suggested: white authors tend to be more prudent and do not dare to transfigure Douglass's iconicity, because they could be accused of cultural appropriation and racism by the black community; on the contrary, black artists can be more direct in their reinterpretation of Douglass's figure, since they are dealing with their own past, so their alternative versions are not perceived as a way to belittle and disparage one of the major leading figures of African-American history.

In spite of their sometimes ruthless revisions, both white and black authors think that Frederick Douglass was a great man who contributed to reshape the idea of blackness in the American society. On the surface, it may seem that contemporary writers want to destroy Douglass's self-representation through their revisions of Douglass's persona, but this is not their aim. The novels I have analyzed in my

dissertation have indeed the power of humanizing Douglass, who has been considered almost a sacred figure in American history. Authors such as McCann, McBride and Rhodes are indeed just focusing on (and in some cases perhaps exaggerating) Douglass's vices and flaws in order to divest him of his aura of sacredness and focus on him as a human being. As a consequence, Douglass's self-representation and its contemporary revisions end up being two sides of the same coin: although they deeply differ from each other, they intertwine and provide a complete description of Frederick Douglass, not only the leader, but also the man.

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SUMMARY

Il percorso accademico magistrale che ho deciso di sviluppare in questi due anni è stato improntato in particolar modo allo studio di autori contemporanei di lingua inglese, al fine di analizzare come la tradizione letteraria e storica di paesi anglofoni ne influenzi l'arte coeva, specialmente la letteratura ed il cinema. Questa tesi nasce proprio dal desiderio di esaminare le nuove modalità di interpretazione di eventi e personaggi storici adottate da scrittori e registi contemporanei, i quali contribuiscono a restituirne un'immagine più completa e perciò più veritiera.

Una delle recenti tendenze che si riscontrano sia nella letteratura che nel cinema contemporaneo statunitense è la ripresa di eventi storici e personaggi realmente esistiti ai quali viene data un'interpretazione alternativa rispetto alla loro rappresentazione canonica e socialmente accettata. Alcuni autori contemporanei, infatti, recuperano dalla storia quelle narrazioni che si sono cristallizzate e stratificate per dare loro nuova vita e per far emergere aspetti solitamente taciuti, adottando una prospettiva di narrazione inusuale e, talvolta, uno stile innovativo. Attraverso questi autori, figure iconiche, come quella del leader afroamericano Frederick Douglass, vengono completamente revisionate e desacralizzate allo scopo di rivelarne la natura umana. In questo modo, i difetti e le mancanze che erano stati omessi nelle precedenti rappresentazioni diventano centrali nelle revisioni di autori contemporanei, nelle quali vengono messi in luce tutti i limiti umani e i difetti caratteriali di figure eroiche del passato. Douglass è infatti riuscito a crearsi un'autorappresentazione di leader fiero e dignitoso che ha resistito dalla metà dell'800 fino ai giorni nostri. Attraverso i suoi scritti, ma soprattutto grazie alle fotografie per le quali posava, il leader afroamericano ha acquisito una voce nel

panorama politico e letterario americano, rispondendo con i suoi ritratti alle rappresentazioni caricaturali degli afroamericani che la società americana del XIX secolo diffondeva attraverso i media. Tuttavia, questo processo non è stato né semplice né rapido: Douglass doveva affermarsi in una società profondamente razzista che basava gran parte della sua ricchezza sullo sfruttamento degli schiavi neri nelle grandi piantagioni del sud degli Stati Uniti.

Prima di analizzare come gli scrittori contemporanei revisionino l'iconicità di Douglass è importante contestualizzare la sua opera nel contesto socio-culturale degli Stati Uniti del diciannovesimo secolo. Per questo motivo, questa tesi è divisa in due sezioni: la prima spiega come Douglass sia stato in grado di emergere come portavoce della comunità afroamericana, mentre la seconda riguarda la ripresa contemporanea della sua figura e le revisioni letterarie della sua iconicità.

Il primo capitolo offre inizialmente una panoramica sull'esperienza della schiavitù e sulla rappresentazione stereotipata della comunità nera da parte della società americana del diciannovesimo secolo, per poi sfociare in un'analisi di come Douglass riesca a combattere le immagini caricaturali della *blackness* grazie ai suoi scritti, ai suoi discorsi e ai ritratti fotografici.

La schiavitù è un tema centrale sia nella vita che nelle opere di Douglass, in quanto egli trascorre i suoi primi 20 anni di vita come schiavo presso la piantagione del Capitano Anthony in Maryland. Qui Douglass esperisce tutta la crudeltà e la brutalità della schiavitù fin dall'infanzia, quando assiste di nascosto alla fustigazione di sua zia Hester per aver disobbedito agli ordini del padrone. Quell'episodio è ricordato da Douglass come il momento in cui realizza la sua condizione di totale subordinazione al padrone bianco. Il sistema schiavistico americano infatti basava la

sua forza sul soggiogamento sia fisico che psicologico degli schiavi, perpetuando svariate strategie atte alla disumanizzazione del soggetto e all'indebolimento della virilità dei maschi. Il processo di disumanizzazione e oggettivazione cominciava non appena i negrieri rapivano intere popolazioni africane dell'entroterra per venderle nel mercato degli schiavi americano. I neri, divisi secondo il sesso, venivano incatenati a due a due e stipati nelle stive delle navi, dove giacevano orizzontalmente per quasi tutta la traversata atlantica in modo da ottimizzare lo spazio. Di conseguenza, la situazione igienico-sanitaria era molto più che precaria: gli schiavi non possedevano spazio vitale per espletare i propri bisogni fisiologici e morivano perché sprovvisti degli anticorpi necessari a combattere quelle malattie dalle quali l'uomo bianco era invece immune. Dopo circa tre mesi, i sopravvissuti sbarcavano sulle coste americane dove venivano venduti come oggetti tramite aste ai vari proprietari di piantagioni, dove avrebbero subito violenze per il resto della loro vita. Tuttavia, la violenza era probabilmente il metodo più eclatante di assoggettamento degli schiavi ma non certo l'unico modo per manipolare il comportamento e la percezione di sé della comunità nera.

La religione, attraverso un'interpretazione letterale della Bibbia, contribuì a presentare la schiavitù come pratica morale e giusta: da un lato gli schiavisti si sentivano giustificati a perpetuare violenze contro i neri, dall'altro la comunità nera stessa si autoconvinceva della propria inferiorità. Agli schiavi infatti veniva impedito di preservare riti e usanze della propria cultura e venivano indottrinati dai bianchi che leggevano loro solo quei passi della Bibbia che legittimavano la loro condizione di subordinazione. Per mantenere l'egemonia sulla comunità nera, la legge americana sanzionava infatti chi insegnava agli schiavi a leggere e a scrivere, in quanto

potenziali armi di emancipazione. Mantenere i neri nell'ignoranza era infatti una delle fondamenta su cui poggiava il sistema schiavistico e un ulteriore esercizio di controllo da parte della società americana.

Ben presto gli schiavisti si resero conto che il controllo psicologico funzionava meglio delle percosse: l'umiliazione e la svirilizzazione degli schiavi maschi – attraverso lo stupro delle loro donne o il ricorso ad appellativi che sminuivano la loro autorità – permetteva ai proprietari delle piantagioni di esercitare il controllo su un gran numero di neri che, distrutti psicologicamente, non si ribellavano. Questo spiega come nella quasi totalità delle piantagioni presenti nel sud degli Stati Uniti non si siano verificate insurrezioni da parte degli schiavi, sebbene la comunità nera presente in una piantagione fosse molto più numerosa della compagine bianca.

Attraverso testi fondanti della letteratura afroamericana, come ad esempio *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* di Harriet Jacobs e *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, an American Slave* di Frederick Douglass, la schiavitù emerge come un'istituzione patriarcale che girava attorno alla figura del padrone, il quale ricopriva il ruolo di padre, mentre gli schiavi erano relegati ad una posizione subordinata paragonabile a quella che un figlio ricopre in una relazione familiare. La propaganda schiavista aveva adottato questa rappresentazione patriarcale nel periodo precedente lo scoppio della Guerra di Secessione (1861-1865) come difesa della schiavitù: in quel periodo, le dinamiche che si verificavano all'interno delle piantagioni vennero riprodotte come riconducibili al rapporto subordinato padre-figlio, in cui il padre sa cos'è meglio per il proprio figlio e questi gli ubbidisce ciecamente. Di conseguenza, le dinamiche sociali all'interno delle piantagioni venivano delineate come rapporti di rispetto reciproco tra il padrone e lo schiavo, in

cui il primo si prendeva cura del secondo e questi ricambiava mostrandogli tutta la sua lealtà. Per diffondere questa visione di schiavitù benevole e caritatevole, i media cominciarono a far circolare rappresentazioni stereotipate di afroamericani, i quali venivano inseriti in categorie ben precise con specifiche caratteristiche: il *Sambo* incarnava il prototipo di schiavo sempre allegro, che suonava il banjo, ballava e cantava; la *Mammy* era la schiava domestica obesa che si occupava dei figli del padrone; i *Pickannnies* rappresentavano i bambini afroamericani con caratteristiche fisiche simili a quelle delle scimmie. Inoltre, il rapporto donna-uomo all'interno dell'affettività nera veniva rappresentato con caratteristiche completamente opposte rispetto a quelle che caratterizzavano la coppia bianca. Nella società americana la donna doveva abitare la sfera domestica ed essere remissiva nei confronti del marito, mentre l'uomo si dedicava alla sfera pubblica e possedeva risolutezza e autorità. La raffigurazione della famiglia nera invece contraddiceva le norme di genere della società americana del XIX secolo, poiché la donna occupava una posizione autoritaria e di conseguenza svirilizzante per l'uomo. Tale rappresentazione era strumentale all'esaltazione della virilità bianca e, allo stesso tempo, sottintendeva che lo stile di vita degli afroamericani fosse in contrapposizione alla norma e quindi ad una società civilizzata.

Gli anni che precedettero la Guerra Civile portarono speranza per gli afroamericani che, ispirati dagli ideali di uguaglianza, pensavano che l'emancipazione fosse ormai a portata di mano. Questo entusiasmo venne però stroncato dalla nuova politica adottata dalla società americana che andò a sostituire le vecchie rappresentazioni caricaturali diffondendo l'idea che i neri, senza il controllo dei bianchi, si sarebbero trasformati in selvaggi che avrebbero minato l'ordine

sociale americano. Per questa ragione, le caricature che troviamo a ridosso degli anni '60 dell'Ottocento presentano la comunità nera come ribelle, aggressiva, violenta e avversa alla civilizzazione, giustificando così il maltrattamento, la segregazione e il linciaggio perpetuati nei confronti della comunità nera come metodi accettabili di controllo sociale. Il repentino cambio di rotta della società americana nella rappresentazione della comunità nera si spiega nella volontà degli stati sudisti di mantenere la schiavitù in quanto istituzione redditizia. Infatti, una rappresentazione che includeva le condizioni inumane nelle quali versavano gli schiavi nelle piantagioni sarebbe stata controproducente per la società americana, che quindi manipolava la rappresentazione di ciò che realmente succedeva nelle piantagioni bombardando l'opinione pubblica con immagini che in un primo momento difendevano e successivamente legittimavano la schiavitù.

A queste rappresentazioni stereotipate risponde Frederick Douglass, il cui obiettivo è rinobilitare e restituire dignità al soggetto afroamericano. Dopo essere scappato dalla piantagione in cui era schiavo, Douglass diventa un abolizionista e le sue doti retoriche lo rendono ben presto uno degli esponenti di spicco di tutto il movimento, nonché il portavoce per eccellenza dei diritti degli afroamericani. Egli riesce a restituire lo status di essere umano alla comunità nera attraverso la sua opera eterogenea: i discorsi appassionati e non accomodanti, la narrativa eroica, la riscrittura incessante delle sue autobiografie e i suoi ritratti, studiati in modo minuzioso, sono stati fondamentali nella costruzione del suo personaggio e hanno lasciato un'eredità che influenza tuttora la comunità afroamericana, che lo considera un eroe.

Nell'immaginario afroamericano, Douglass è diventato infatti una figura di eroismo perché ha sempre inseguito la propria indipendenza e l'autodeterminazione, soprattutto dopo la sua emancipazione. Ciò è testimoniato dal fatto che dopo un periodo di collaborazione con l'abolizionista bianco William Lloyd Garrison, direttore del settimanale *The Liberator*, Douglass decide di fondare un giornale tutto suo, *The North Star*. Questa scelta di emanciparsi dall'aiuto di Garrison dimostra la sua determinazione e la sua volontà di non sottomettersi alle direttive degli abolizionisti bianchi. Un'altra occasione in cui Douglass conferma di non essere compiacente verso i bianchi è riscontrabile nel testo del suo discorso *What to the Slave is the Fourth of July?* tenuto nel 1852 al Corinthian Hall di Rochester, in occasione dell'anniversario della Dichiarazione di Indipendenza. Qui Douglass sfida il pubblico presente attraverso una feroce invettiva farcita di parole accusatorie, sottolineando l'ipocrisia della ricorrenza, in quanto gli Stati Uniti stavano festeggiando la liberazione dall'oppressione inglese, ma non si rendevano conto di star esercitando lo stesso assoggettamento nei confronti della comunità nera.

Il tentativo di Douglass di proiettare immagini di eroismo nero continua attraverso la sua narrativa: il suo racconto lungo *The Heroic Slave* del 1852 romanza la vita di Madison Washington, uno schiavo della Virginia che nel 1841 guidò una rivolta sulla nave *Creole*. Durante questa ribellione, Washington e un gruppo di schiavi riuscirono a prendere il controllo della nave ferendo e uccidendo gran parte dell'equipaggio bianco, dirigendosi successivamente a Nassau, dove divennero uomini liberi. Attraverso questo racconto, Douglass riprende i temi sviluppati durante il suo discorso al Corinthian Hall riconoscendo un'analogia tra l'eroismo dei padri fondatori americani e quello di figure afroamericane che combattono per la

propria libertà e autodeterminazione. L'iconicità di Washington è d'ispirazione per Douglass: l'autore afroamericano infatti plasma il personaggio di Washington attribuendogli le caratteristiche che riteneva necessarie per consentire agli afroamericani di riappropriarsi sia della propria umanità che della maschilità. Coraggio, forza di volontà e assertività sono le qualità che contraddistinguono maggiormente la caratterizzazione che Douglass fa di questo eroe, sebbene l'autore afroamericano riconosca nell'alfabetizzazione un requisito fondamentale per la propria e altrui emancipazione. Fin da bambino, Douglass capisce infatti l'importanza dell'alfabetizzazione come mezzo di liberazione dall'oppressione bianca. Durante il periodo in cui vive a Baltimora, la sua padrona gli insegna a leggere e a scrivere ma quando il marito se ne accorge s'infuria e le vieta categoricamente di continuare. L'apparentemente ingiustificata rabbia del padrone è un'epifania per Douglass, che comprende che mantenere gli schiavi nell'ignoranza era il modo per preservare l'ordine sociale costituito dalla società americana e che quindi l'alfabetizzazione degli schiavi sarebbe stato il punto di svolta nel percorso di emancipazione della comunità nera. Questa rivelazione lo spinge a plasmare la sua identità in contrapposizione ai desideri del suo padrone e si istruisce autonomamente.

Il desiderio di Douglass di restituire dignità e umanità all'intera comunità nera non si limita però ai discorsi, alle autobiografie e opere letterarie ma si realizza anche attraverso la fotografia. Douglass infatti capisce sin da subito il potenziale della fotografia nella lotta per l'emancipazione afroamericana, perché questo nuovo mezzo di espressione aveva la capacità di umanizzare gli schiavi agli occhi della società americana. Secondo Douglass infatti, la fotografia rappresenta le persone esattamente come appaiono e può quindi ovviare alle rappresentazioni stereotipate e caricaturali

di cui la società americana era permeata. Inoltre, la fotografia è esaltata dal leader afroamericano perché può cambiare il modo in cui il pubblico percepisce il soggetto fotografato che, adottando alcuni accorgimenti di postura, espressione facciale e vestiario, può evocare e veicolare dignità e rispettabilità. Per questo motivo, Douglass posa per decine di ritratti in cui appare in forte contrasto con le rappresentazioni della *blackness* proposte dalla stampa. Il ritratto ad opera di Samuel J. Miller è una delle foto più esemplificative della politica adottata da Douglass: alla soglia dei trent'anni, Douglass si fa ritrarre in una posa intimidatoria e con lo sguardo severo diretto verso l'osservatore, trasmettendo di essere conscio della sua prestantza fisica e avvenenza. In tutti i ritratti si può osservare una scelta oculata del vestiario, che denota sia un certo grado di dandismo che l'aderenza agli standard sociali della borghesia e alla moda coeva. L'origine afroamericana di Douglass si esplicita soprattutto nell'esibizione fiera della capigliatura leonina, una caratteristica intrinseca della *blackness* che egli disciplina solamente attraverso la scriminatura a lato, secondo la moda del tempo. Tuttavia, i ritratti in cui Douglass compare esibendo la sua natura ribelle ed eroica lasciano via via spazio ad immagini più concilianti in cui assume un atteggiamento sempre più patriarcale, adottando la classica posizione in cui posano famosi leader (il busto a tre quarti e lo sguardo diretto verso destra) e le convenzioni estetiche della pittura eroica.

La seconda parte della tesi si apre sottolineando come quest'ultimo tipo di rappresentazione patriarcale dell'eroismo nero sia anche quella che viene adottata dalla società americana contemporanea, che tende a riconoscere e ad accettare figure storiche nere meno controverse mitigandone l'atteggiamento ribelle e raffigurandole secondo criteri conformisti di leadership. Ciò accade per esempio alle statue di

Douglass e di Harriet Tubman situate rispettivamente a Washington e a Boston, in cui l'atteggiamento ribelle e belligerante delle due icone afroamericane viene completamente rimosso a favore di una figurazione più accomodante. Talvolta invece viene fatto un uso improprio di queste icone da parte della società contemporanea che se ne serve per secondi fini. Douglass oggi viene infatti accostato a siti che sfruttano la sua immagine a scopo di lucro o a film e partiti politici che si appropriano della sua iconicità per fare presa sul pubblico.

Negli ultimi anni, tuttavia, la letteratura è stata il maggior ambito di sperimentazione (per autori afroamericani e non) per quanto riguarda il recupero della figura di Douglass. Nonostante questi scrittori stimino Douglass, si distanziano gradualmente dall'autorappresentazione che lo statista afroamericano si è costruito, proponendo una revisione della sua iconicità secondo approcci e stili diversi.

A Colum McCann e a James McBride è dedicato il secondo capitolo, che mette in luce il differente approccio di un autore bianco e di uno scrittore afroamericano rispetto alla figura di Douglass. Lo scrittore irlandese Colum McCann inserisce Douglass in un romanzo, *TransAtlantic*, che intreccia le vite di figure storiche e personaggi inventati in un periodo di tempo oltre i 150 anni. McCann sceglie di ambientare gran parte del suo romanzo in Irlanda partendo da tre eventi storici che sono stati determinanti per lo sviluppo culturale e sociale del suo paese: il primo volo transatlantico di John Alcock e Arthur Brown avvenuto nel 1919; il ciclo di conferenze che Frederick Douglass tiene in Irlanda tra il 1845 e il 1846; il ruolo fondamentale del senatore americano George Mitchell nella pace con l'Irlanda del Nord siglata nel 1998. Nonostante questi tre eventi siano accaduti in epoche differenti e abbiano coinvolto svariate figure, McCann riesce a fondere le biografie di

queste personalità con le vite di quattro donne che rappresentano il fil rouge che collega i tre eventi storici. L'autore irlandese romanza le vite di questi personaggi storici facendo sì che si imbattano brevemente nelle quattro generazioni di donne irlandesi, che sono testimoni di questi eventi o ne vengono ispirate. Il risultato di questo incontro è esplicitato nella seconda parte del romanzo che vede le quattro donne emergere come protagoniste della narrazione.

La bravura di McCann sta nel riuscire a collegare elementi che apparentemente non hanno nulla in comune e ad individuare un fattore unitario dietro alle varie narrazioni. I personaggi storici presenti in *TransAtlantic* mirano alla riduzione della distanza, sia fisica che metaforica: l'obiettivo di Douglass è l'eliminazione della distanza sociale tra neri e bianchi attraverso l'abolizione della schiavitù e il raggiungimento di uguali diritti; Alcock e Brown riducono fisicamente la distanza tra il vecchio continente e gli Stati Uniti; il Senatore Mitchell cerca di trovare un punto di contatto tra le due parti. Allo stesso modo, le donne irlandesi di cui narra *TransAtlantic* lottano per colmare le distanze presenti in una società maschilista, che non permette loro di avere le stesse opportunità e avere uguali diritti degli uomini. Una di queste, Lily, viene ispirata proprio da Douglass, che ha modo di conoscere mentre fa la domestica per l'editore del leader afroamericano. La ragazza decide di partire per gli Stati Uniti in cerca di condizioni di vita migliori di quelle che poteva offrire l'Irlanda, duramente provata dalla carestia dovuta ad un fungo che distrusse quasi la tutto il raccolto di patate. La nuova vita di Lily nel nuovo mondo le dà l'opportunità di realizzarsi e di creare la stirpe di donne che sarà testimone del primo volo transatlantico e, successivamente, delle trattative di pace coordinate dal Senatore Mitchell.

Analizzando il capitolo dedicato a Douglass è possibile scorgere in filigrana come McCann si accosti alla figura iconica del leader afroamericano, costruendo un personaggio complesso completo di difetti di poco conto, sebbene vada sottolineato come la sua caratterizzazione di Douglass aderisca quasi completamente all'autorappresentazione creata dal leader stesso. In primo luogo, Douglass è descritto come un uomo carismatico, risoluto, non accomodante e molto attento al suo aspetto fisico, in quanto elemento determinante per evocare dignità. La sua vanità viene continuamente sottolineata dall'autore irlandese tramite i numerosi passi nei quali l'autore afroamericano è descritto mentre si veste, si guarda allo specchio o usa i bilancieri. McCann si sofferma anche sull'impatto e la presa che sia il suo aspetto fisico che la sua mente brillante avevano sulle donne. Malgrado ciò, l'autore irlandese non osa addentrarsi nella reale vita sentimentale di Douglass, perciò si limita a tratteggiarlo come un uomo integerrimo che non cede alle lusinghe delle donne irlandesi. In realtà, il leader afroamericano era anticonvenzionale da questo punto di vista, poiché era sposato con una donna nera (Anna Murray), ma ha mantenuto per decenni una relazione adultera con Otilie Assing, la sua traduttrice bianca.

Il quadro che emerge da una tale caratterizzazione di quest'icona afroamericana non si discosta molto dalla raffigurazione canonica dell'iconicità di Douglass, poiché McCann (in quanto autore bianco non americano) non osa scalfire e decostruire l'autorappresentazione di un leader afroamericano così importante. Per questo motivo, l'autore irlandese si limita ad enfatizzare quei tratti della sua personalità già presenti nell'autorappresentazione proposta da Douglass stesso, calcando giusto un po' la mano sulla vanità e l'egocentrismo del leader. La scelta di

non stravolgere l'iconicità di Douglass è molto probabilmente dettata dal fatto che, in quanto autore bianco, McCann non si senta autorizzato a mettere in discussione un'icona afroamericana dato che precedenti tentativi di intrusione da parte di autori e registi bianchi nella tradizione afroamericana sono stati percepiti dalla comunità nera come una vera e propria appropriazione culturale causando lunghe controversie.

Se McCann aderisce alla rappresentazione convenzionale di Douglass, James McBride adotta un approccio diametralmente opposto: in quanto autore afroamericano, McBride può permettersi di riprendere il suo passato e revisionarlo in maniera più libera, mettendo in discussione e addirittura ridicolizzando figure prominenti della sua eredità culturale senza il rischio di essere accusato di razzismo. Nel suo romanzo *The Good Lord Bird* pubblicato nel 2013, lo scrittore afroamericano revisiona le figure di due grandi abolizionisti, John Brown e Frederick Douglass, tramite lo sguardo del protagonista/narratore Henry "The Onion" Shackleford, un dodicenne mulatto che per la maggior parte della narrazione viene scambiato da Brown e da Douglass per una ragazza, Henrietta. Lo sguardo di Onion è dissacrante: Brown viene descritto come un fanatico religioso, la cui missione è liberare tutti gli schiavi, noncurante del fatto che molti di loro (Onion in primis) non vogliono affatto emanciparsi dai loro padroni; Douglass è dipinto come un donnaiolo egocentrico e maschilista, che tenta perfino di stuprare Henrietta. Attraverso un'ironia pungente, McBride sveste completamente Douglass dalla sua aura iconica di leader irreprensibile e mette in risalto tutti i suoi limiti come uomo attraverso una narrazione che fa emergere la sua voracità, ubriachezza e infedeltà. Inoltre, *The Good Lord Bird* rappresenta anche una critica alla politica sessista di Douglass. Il protagonista, influenzato dalla propria messinscena in cui finge di essere una

ragazza, adotta non solo il vestiario ma anche la prospettiva femminile e si rende conto degli abusi subiti da Anna e Otilie, le quali però nell'opera di McBride rimangono prive di voce, poiché non hanno modo di raccontare in prima persona la loro storia.

Jewell Parker Rhodes dà a queste due donne l'opportunità di esprimere i propri sentimenti e le proprie frustrazioni attraverso il suo romanzo *Douglass' Women* del 2003, su cui si incentra il terzo capitolo di questa tesi di laurea. Nella *Narrative* di Douglass infatti la rappresentazione femminile è problematica: la madre e la zia, nonostante attuino delle strategie di resistenza agli ordini del loro padrone, sono descritte come vittime passive della schiavitù, perché Douglass è incapace di vedere i loro tentativi di imporre la propria volontà. Inoltre, la moglie Anna è quasi totalmente esclusa dalla narrazione della vita di Douglass, nonostante abbia ricoperto un ruolo fondamentale nella sua emancipazione. Attraverso una narrazione diaristica che alterna la prospettiva di Anna e quella di Otilie, *Douglass' Women* contrappone queste due donne profondamente diverse tra loro, che emergono come esponenti di due mondi apparentemente inconciliabili: Anna, una donna afroamericana libera, è legata alle sue origini e tradizioni e fa delle arti domestiche la sua missione; Otilie, bianca, è una femminista e crede in un nuovo tipo di donna, i cui interessi sono proiettati al di fuori dell'ambito domestico. Il confronto tra le due donne si realizza soprattutto nei due diversi tipi di educazione che le donne ricevono, in quanto Anna è analfabeta e ricorre al sapere orale tramandato dalla madre, mentre Otilie è una donna colta che ha viaggiato e conosce molte lingue. Per questi motivi, Otilie si sente superiore ad Anna e ritiene che Douglass si meriti una compagna alla sua altezza. Anche Douglass riconosce le mancanze della moglie e sembra riconoscere la

donna nuova come compagna ideale per un uomo come lui. Tuttavia, il romanzo mette in discussione questa contrapposizione binaria fra la donna conservatrice focalizzata sui figli e sulla famiglia e la donna colta e aperta: lo scontro ideologico è vinto da Anna poiché si rende conto che Frederick non l'ha mai amata e vive per i suoi figli mentre Otilie, al contrario, diventa schiava del suo amore per Douglass e alla fine si suicida. Attraverso il personaggio di Anna, *Douglass' Women* mette quindi in crisi quest'idea progressista del femminismo e rivaluta la cultura di domesticità delle donne, che è stata rinnegata da una parte del femminismo bianco perché ritenuta non importante e inferiore. Secondo l'interpretazione di Rhodes, liberarsi delle arti delle donne significa infatti sradicare le tradizioni delle madri e, allo stesso tempo, confermare una lettura che mette al primo posto l'uomo e i valori maschili.

Ad uno sguardo superficiale, i tre romanzi che revisionano l'autorappresentazione di Frederick Douglass possono apparire come una sorta di lesa maestà nei confronti del leader afroamericano, in quanto sembrano voler scalfire o perfino distruggere la sua iconicità. Tuttavia, le opere degli scrittori contemporanei prese in esame in questa tesi hanno il potere di umanizzare Douglass e di spogliarlo dell'aura di sacralità che lo ha circondato per decenni. Autori come McCann, McBride e Rhodes enfatizzano, e in alcuni casi esasperano, i vizi e i difetti di Douglass portando alla luce tutti i limiti della sua umanità. Di conseguenza, la rappresentazione che il leader fa di sé stesso e le revisioni contemporanee della sua iconicità finiscono per essere due facce della stessa medaglia: combinando le rappresentazioni, Douglass emerge come una figura a tutto tondo, non solo come

leader irreprensibile ma anche e soprattutto come uomo, con tutti i limiti che questa condizione comporta.