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# The Philosophical Significance of Slave Narratives

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THE PHILOSOPHICAL SIGNIFICANCE OF SLAVE NARRATIVES

by

Darian Spearman

B.S., Carleton College, 2011

A Thesis

Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the  
Masters of Arts Degree

Department of Philosophy  
in the Graduate School  
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THESIS APPROVAL

THE PHILOSOPHICAL SIGNIFICANCE OF SLAVE NARRATIVES

By

Darian Spearman

A Thesis Submitted in Partial  
Fulfillment of the Requirements  
for the Degree of  
Master of Arts  
in the field of Philosophy

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AN ABSTRACT OF THE THESIS OF

DARIAN SPEARMAN for the Master of Arts degree in PHILOSOPHY, presented on July 2, 2014, at Southern Illinois University Carbondale.

TITLE: THE PHILOSOPHICAL SIGNIFICANCE OF SLAVE NARRATIVES

MAJOR PROFESSOR: Dr. Kenneth Stickers

This thesis asserts that the slave narratives are a significant resource for philosophers. Following Lewis Gordon, I argue that the slave narratives should not be understood merely as experiential evidence by which to validate Western thought. Instead, the narratives should be read as moments in which Black narrators shared their unique insights on the Western world. In line with Angela Davis, I argue that these critiques are still relevant to philosophers of this day and age. However, I argue that Davis' Marxist reading of Frederick Douglass' *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, an American Slave* is still vulnerable to Gordon's criticism. Using the narrative Olaudah Equiano, I demonstrate that by reading the slave narratives as expressing unique thoughts, philosophers can discover new resources to invigorate their philosophical inquiries.

## DEDICATION

To my ancestors who, in the face of overwhelming evil, decided to pray, love, create, and fight.

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## INTRODUCTION

Could the culture of Black slaves produce philosophers? If so, did they produce anything that challenged and expanded the Western canon in a meaningful way? While the current philosophical community has come a long way from employing the philosophical anthropologies of thinkers like Aristotle, Kant, and Hume to discredit the fertility of Black minds past and present, there is still significant work to be done if the intellectual fruits of Black existence are to be properly incorporated into contemporary philosophical discussions. While one can observe some Philosophy departments being open to the works of thinkers like W.E.B Dubois, Frantz Fanon and even Frederick Douglass, the vast majority of departments relegate Black intellectual works of the past to the fields of History, Sociology, Religious Studies, Africana Studies and Literature. This trend manifests in a particularly severe way in the reception of the American slave narratives by contemporary philosophers. In certain philosophical circles if one were to state that one were doing commentary on the thought of Olaudah Equiano, William Wells Brown, or even Frederick Douglass, one would be criticized. It would be argued that the works of such authors should not be placed in direct dialogue with figures such as Plato, Immanuel Kant, John Dewey, Simone de Beauvoir and Nagarjuna because the authors of slave narratives accomplished little more than stating the facts of their lives. Furthermore, they would argue that while it could be granted that the authors of slave narratives managed to influence the hearts and minds of Westerners, the slave narratives do not fit the form of argumentation taken up by contemporary philosophers within the Western and Eastern traditions. If one were to retort that Plato and the Upanishads also do not produce works that fit the stylistic forms of modern and contemporary philosophy, one would get a response that the slave narratives still do not

explicitly wrestle with concepts on the level of those previous texts, which were bound by cultural restraints that influenced the form of those text.

How do we explain such an attitude about the intellectual sophistication and uniqueness of the slave narratives? Why is it that the thought of intellectuals such as, St. Augustine, Plato, and Nietzsche are granted philosophical depth despite the stylistic differences of their works while the slave narratives are not given similar attention? The relative recentness of deep scholarly attention to slave narratives provides one part of the explanation. It must be remembered that as recently as 1959 the argument by the preeminent historian Stanley Elkins, that the institution of slavery in America was so efficiently brutal that Black people were largely deprived of a sense of interiority and history independent from their masters', was accepted by many academics, both black and white alike. Furthermore, it was only ten years later that Angela Davis made her groundbreaking claim that within the history of black literature lies a discussion on the nature of freedom more enlightening "than all the philosophical discourses on this theme in the history of western society."<sup>1</sup> Prior to this time one would be hard pressed to find a philosopher willing to argue that any articulations of Black consciousness could rival Locke or Sartre in depth of understanding, especially within literature. I do not mean to imply that the argument that slave literature is philosophically significant has never emerged before in the history of interaction between Black and Western thought. Rather, I want to draw attention to the

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<sup>1</sup> Angela Davis, "Lectures on Liberation," in *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglas, an American Slave Written by Himself* ed. Angela Davis ( San Francisco: City Lights Publishers, 2010), 46.

fact that in no time prior had pamphlets containing such a statement been endorsed by twenty nine mostly white academics.<sup>2</sup>

The academy's traditional eurocentricism represents the second reason that the slave narratives have not been fully mined for their philosophical riches. Lewis Gordon laments that the thought of Blacks is generally viewed as derivative of the thought of Western intellectuals with whom the black thinker is engaged. Gordon notes that Frederick Douglass has been branded a "Garrisonian," W.E.B. Dubois a "Hegelian" and Fanon a "Satrean" despite each thinker's substantial divergence in thought from the thinkers to whom they are compared. Gordon would not be alarmed if the general trend within the Western academy was to place the genealogy of a text above its novel contributions to its field. However, he notes that while Sartre draws heavily upon the thought of Kierkegaard and Husserl to ground his existential phenomenology he is not known as "Kirkegaardian" or "Husserlian." Furthermore while Foucault makes extensive use of Nietzsche's genealogical method, a person would find themselves the black sheep of most intellectual circles if they proclaimed that Foucault was merely applying Nietzsche's ideas in a contemporary French context. So why are the works of blacks not held to the same standards of intellectual production as whites? Gordon claims that the modern academy holds a patronizing and racist belief about black intellectual productions that is nearly axiomatic in force i.e., that "*White intellectuals provide theory; Black intellectuals provide experience* [sic]."<sup>3</sup> Stated another way; "When reading a work by a black intellectual, look for the ways they used Western thought

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<sup>2</sup> Davis, "Lectures", 44.

<sup>3</sup> Lewis Gordon, *Existential Africana* (New York: Routledge, 2000), accessed April 25, 2014. <http://rockethics.psu.edu/education/documents/ExistentialAfricanaUnderstandingExistentialThoughtLewisGordon.pdf>, 29-31.

and stylistic conventions to express Black experience. Do not look for the ways the writer intentionally augmented, subverted, contested or advanced Western concepts and stylistic forms.” Under this framework the work of Black intellectuals, such as the slave narratives, function as little more than case studies to prove or disprove the efficacy of various figures within the Western canon. The Black intellectual is granted little ground for original thought within such a framework.

The two above mentioned trends, the infancy of philosophical investigation in Black literature and Eurocentric scholastic norms, together create a climate in which the ingenuity of black thought in the slave narratives can be denied or deemphasized. In his article “Black Message/White Envelope,” John Sekora argues that the slave narratives represent a form of black literature in which white people were trying to convince other white people of the slavery’s immorality through the voice of former slaves. According to his analysis, white abolitionists used their political and economic power to force blacks to adhere to a script which was carefully sculpted around the boundaries of white credulity. He states that slave narratives represent an instance in which “once again, white sponsors compel a black author to approve, to authorize white institutional power. The black message will be sealed within a white envelope.”<sup>4</sup> In assessing the thought of Frederick Douglass, Frank M. Kirkland argues in “Enslavement, Moral Suasion and Struggles” that though Douglass differs with Kant on what constitutes enlightenment themes, these differences “neither challenge nor undermine the idea of moral suasion as an enlightenment-inspired and Kantian-framed communicative practice of

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<sup>4</sup> John Sekora, “Black Message/White Envelope: Genre, Authenticity, and Authority in the Antebellum Slave Narrative”, *Callalo* 32( 1987): 491-502.

justification.”<sup>5</sup> Kirkland’s conclusion about Frederick Douglass’ thought is quite similar to Sekora’s. Both would argue that the voice of this former slave struggled against, but did not seriously challenge, the dominant European frameworks he used to communicate with his white audiences.

Even those who defend the novelty of thought in the slave narratives still have the tendency to fall into the intellectual trap illuminated by Gordon. Though Dickson D. Bruce Jr. argues that the control over the voices of free blacks is “sometimes exaggerated” by critics like the above mentioned Sekora, Bruce still does not grant a deep level of intellectual autonomy to the voices in the slave narratives. He claims that the “view of freedom embodied in the slave narratives” is the concept as it was defined during the Jacksonian period, i.e., “the freedom to do whatever one felt to be right or necessary, without any external constraints.”<sup>6</sup> Even Davis, who went so far as to argue that the narratives contain an important critique of the entire Western discourse of freedom in her first lecture on liberation, claims that “Frederick Douglass existentially experiences what Marx theoretically formulates” when she describes Douglass’ disenchantment with American Christianity.

I wish to add further evidence to Davis’ claim that the slave narratives are philosophically significant. However, my understanding of “significant” is informed by Gordon’s concern that the work of black intellectuals is too quickly reduced to a derivation of a thinker from the established Western canon. After elaborating Davis’ arguments about the philosophical value of

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<sup>5</sup> Frank M. Kirkland, “Enslavement, Moral Suasion and Struggles,” in *Frederick Douglass: A Critical Reader* Ed. Bill Lawson and Frank M. Kirkland (Oxford: Blackwell Publishers Ltd, 1999),257.

<sup>6</sup> Dickson D. Bruce, Jr, “Politics and Political Philosophy in the Slave Narrative” in *The Cambridge Companion to The African American Slave Narrative*, ed. Audrey A. Fisch (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press2007), 37.

slave narratives, I will demonstrate a *few* reasons why it could be methodologically better to resist the impulse to envelope what is discovered within the progression of Western concepts and discursive forms. The first will be a critique of Davis' Marxist reading of Douglass. The second will involve a brief exposition of the unique political philosophy of Odulah Equiano. I hope that the reader will get a glimpse of how fruitful it can be to see the authors of the slave narratives speaking *to* and *with* Western intellectuals rather than seeing the ideas of the Western canon expressed *through* the slave narratives.

## CHAPTER 1: SLAVE NARRATIVES AS EXPRESSIONS OF UNIQUE IDEAS

Before moving to Davis' passionate assertion that slave narratives provides valuable critiques of and insights for the Western intellectual tradition, it is important to address the argument of Sekora. Is it true that the narratives are a controlled collection of anecdotes that serve to advance uncritically the philosophical assumptions of white abolitionists?

John Sekora unfolds his argument by referencing a famous passage from Frederick Douglass' *My Bondage My Freedom* in which Douglass reveals the ways in which white Abolitionists seek to control his voice once he began to move away from the script of the abolitionist. Douglass states:

I was a 'graduate from the peculiar institution' Mr. Collins used to say 'with my diploma written on my back!'... 'Let us have the facts,' said the people. So also said Friend George Foster, who always wished to pin me down to my simple narrative. 'Give us the facts,' said Collins, 'we will take care of the philosophy'... 'People won't believe you ever was a slave, Frederick, if you keep on this way' said Friend Foster.<sup>7</sup>

Unlike their white intellectual contemporaries, the writers of narratives were expected merely to give their experiences. The people who were willing to protect them from slave hunters, finance their books, and distribute their words also did not see fit to publish sophisticated works of black intelligence. In fact, Sekora argues, the slaves who were allowed to tell their tales were the ones "whose lives could be absorbed into white social and literary forms...Agents and editors were frequently cautioned against credulity when listening to tales of slavery...Not black storytelling but white authentication made for useable narratives." Sekora states that many abolitionists

believed their movement would be hindered if they allowed Blacks to create works which fit the stylistic norms of philosophy or poetry. Many white northerners believed that Africans were intellectually and morally inferior to whites and were ambivalent about slavery's role in the lives of Black people. If the writing of a slave came off as too erudite, the white audiences might believe the writer had never been a slave or worse, that slavery had *helped* the slave reach his potential in some fashion. Sekora states that the editors and publishers of the slave narratives ultimately believed that seeing a slave's wounded back would convince whites of the horrible reality of slavery far better than his thoughts. However, they were well aware of the power of writing to persuade those who could not attend face to face engagements with escaped slaves. For Sekora, the narratives emerge not as a means of communicating individualized Black realities, but of delivering the concrete "facts" of slavery in a manner that was non-threatening to white sensibilities.<sup>8</sup> Furthermore, he states that abolitionist used the narratives to establish a "moral genealogy" of American slavery which condemned the institution as it manifested in each state. However, abolitionists sought to frame their genealogy within their liberal philosophies and thus only chose narratives that "did not subvert abolitionist doctrine."<sup>9</sup> Abolitionist interviewers had an established and well regulated list of questions with which to extract information from slaves; and abolitionists editors ensured that slave autobiographies did not stray from mainstream

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<sup>7</sup> Frederick Douglass, *My Bondage My Freedom*. (New York: Miller, Orton and Mulligan, 1865)  
<http://solomon.bltc.alexanderstreet.com.proxy.lib.siu.edu/>, accessed March 10,2015, 361-362.

<sup>8</sup> Sekora, "Black Message"491-497. Also See Frederick Douglas " The Anti-Slavery Movement, lecture delivered before the Rochester Ladies' Anti-Slavery Society, March 19 ,1855" in *The Frederick Douglas Reader*, Ed Philip S. Foner.( Chicago: Lawrence Hill Books, 1994). Douglas quotes an unnamed though great leader of the abolitionist movement as saying "the anti-slavery movement, both religiously and politically, has transcended the ability of the sufferers from American slavery and prejudice, as a class, to keep pace with, or to perceive what are its demands or to understand the philosophy of its operations"

<sup>9</sup> Sekora,"Black Message", 499.

American literary tropes and metaphors. Thus, Sekora argues, if a slave were to find any kind of “personalizing words” to express himself through his narrative, he “[did] so within the institutional language of abolition.”<sup>10</sup> Thus, Sekora concludes, the voice of the narratives “is a white voice,” and slave narratives are not a legitimate form of biography for they do not represent an instance in which the author intentionally constructs a self through the process of writing.<sup>11</sup>

If Sekora’s argument is true, there is no way that the slave narratives can be considered philosophically significant. As discussed earlier, a philosophically significant work cannot be a mere reformulation of another thinker, or we are better off reading the originator of the ideas. In order for the argument to hold true, it must be established that slave writers were able to transcend the limitations imposed upon them by whites and advance genuine insights about the world. Fortunately such arguments exist.

In “The First Fifty Years of the Slave Narrative, 1760-1810,” William L. Andrews argues that the dynamic described by Sekora significantly stifles the voice of former slave writers only in very early narratives. He argues that in order to make the narratives of authors such as Briton Hammon and James Albert Gronniosaw fit within Western narrative archetypes the “concepts crucial to an evaluation of a Negro’s life” had to be defined according to the “constitutive rules of white institutions and culture.”<sup>12</sup>

However, Andrews claims that by as early as 1795 black writers had begun to transcend and subvert the limitations of the slave narrative form. Andrews draws our attention to moments

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<sup>10</sup> Sekora, “Black Message”, 500.

<sup>11</sup> Sekora, “Black Message”, 510.

in *The Dying Confession of Pomp*, that substantially diverge from the standard forms of white narratives. In the narrative, Pomp's master constantly abuses him despite how well he runs his master's farm. After a series of escapes and recaptures, Pomp begins to hear a singing voice commanding him to kill his master. Pomp kills his master and goes on the run until he is eventually captured and hanged.<sup>13</sup> In previous narratives the slave who escapes or commits a crime against white society inevitably expresses his guilt and converts to God for salvation before his death or re-enslavement. Interestingly, Pomp never admits any feelings of guilt due to killing his master. At the eve of his execution he does claim that he is at peace with himself but Andrews argues that Pomp's sense of peace does not arise out of repenting to God for his sins but "from relief at having been liberated from the power of Furbush."

Andrew's claim that Pomp's narrative diverges from the standards of his publisher is further supported by the fact that the narrative's white "authenticator," Jonathan Plummer struggles to handle the slave's confession. The editorial norm of presenting "just the facts" of black life placed white editors in a catch-22: to alter the narrative substantially undermined the factual "moral genealogy" described by Sekora; on the other hand, the author's lack of remorse over killing a white person represents a direct challenge to the white social order. Plummer attempts to discredit Pomp by claiming the slave lied about hearing voices telling him to murder his master. Andrews asserts that "Like many in the nineteenth century whose assumptions about human nature, black or white, were contradicted by slave narrators, Plummer preserved his world

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<sup>12</sup> William L. Andrews, "The First Fifty Years of the Slave Narrative" in *The Art of Slave Narrative: Original Essays in Criticism and Theory*, ed. John Sekora and Darwin T. Turner, (Macomb: Western Illinois University, 1982), 13.

<sup>13</sup> Andrews, "First Fifty Years", 14.

by denying Pomp's."<sup>14</sup> In contrast to Sekora, Andrews demonstrates that the restrictions whites placed on the slave narratives created problems for Blacks as well as whites. Though whites sought to control the voices of slave narrators, the white institutional commitment to veracity gave slaves space to make radical assertions from their subjectivity. After giving more examples to support his argument, Andrews asserts that even some of the earliest slave narrators discovered ways to resist the editorial intentions of white editors and publishers.

The argument that the slave writers found ways to contribute novel insights in the slave narratives is further supported by Raymond Hedin. In *Strategies of Form in The American Slave Narrative*, Hedin argues that slave writers used common narrative forms not merely to conform to the boundaries of white institutions, but to establish their humanity and upset the expectations of white audiences. Hedin states that the "use of any established genre would of course have the advantage of suggesting [to white audiences] that the writer...can master 'our' forms and is hence 'human' at least to that extent."<sup>15</sup> He argues that the prevalence of conventional Western narrative forms throughout the slave narratives is not evidence in itself that the slave narratives express white ideas about reality and the self. Hedin asks us to consider the idea that many slave writers would have *wanted* to employ the styles and forms of white civilization in order to prove that they were as capable intellectually as the best of their white contemporaries. From this perspective, the structure of the narratives can be viewed as a moment of interest convergence rather than the triumph of the white literary establishment. That is to say, the use of traditional

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<sup>14</sup> Andrews, "First Fifty Years", 15.

<sup>15</sup> Raymond Hedin, "Strategies of Form in The American Slave Narrative", "The First Fifty Years of the Slave Narrative" in *The Art of Slave Narrative: Original Essays in Criticism and Theory*, ed. John Sekora and Darwin T. Turner, (Macomb: Western Illinois University, 1982), 26.

Western narratives tropes did not only serve the interest of white abolitionists, but also Blacks who sought to prove their humanity to their oppressors. However, Hedin does not merely wish to argue that slave writers found conventional narrative structures useful to affirming their humanity; such an argument would not challenge Sekora's claim. If the slave authors did nothing more but demonstrate their ability to fit into the white literary tradition, their act of writing would serve only to establish that white reality was *the* reality. The slave narrators would have in fact failed to articulate independent ideas from their own experience and thus would not have created significant works, philosophically or otherwise.

Hedin demonstrates that the slave narrators subverted traditional white narrative forms by focusing on the lack of closure conveyed throughout the narratives. He states that in many of the narratives key figures in the life of the slave "drop out of the narrator's ken" and are never brought up again.<sup>16</sup> Parents suddenly die, siblings are kidnapped, and children are sold away. Hedin argues that the "disconnectedness of slave life" made it impossible for slave narrators to tell their stories accurately through traditional white narrative structures. In the traditional narrative forms the author revisits the central characters in his life either in person or in memory. These re-visitations allowed the author to demonstrate how he had changed; and reinforced the author's ideas about the self and about society. However, the neat closures of this narrative formula were incompatible with the realities of slave life, and slave authors readily disrupted this narrative aspect when it suited their storytelling.<sup>17</sup> Hedin states that most white readers would

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<sup>16</sup> Hedin, "Strategies of Form", 29

<sup>17</sup> For more on how the precariousness of slave relationships forced slave narrators to disrupt conventional narrative structures see Robert S. Levine, "The Slave Narrative and The Revolutionary Tradition of American

have felt disturbed reading through the narratives as their literary sensibilities were constantly frustrated.

Both Andrews and Hedin demonstrate that the slave narratives were vehicles for Black narrators to express their subjectivity in genuine ways. Counter to Sekora's analysis, the structure of the narratives was not solely dictated by the desires of the white abolitionist literary establishment. Slave narrators found very early that the norms of their publishers and editors could be subverted or challenged. As Andrews shows, the abolitionist mandate to collect "just the facts" from slaves created challenges for White editors *as well as* Black narrators. By claiming that supernatural events or voices led them to their escape attempts or acts of murder, Black narrators implied that their rebellious actions were sanctioned by forces beyond the comprehension and control of white people. Furthermore as Hedin demonstrates, while they did see fit to employ conventional narrative patterns, many black narrators diverged from standard structures when it suited them. While it is beyond the scope of this essay to establish definitively which narratives best communicated Black subjectivity and to what degree, it should be clear that reading these narratives as Black expressions of Western ideas oversimplifies these texts. If Andrews and Hedin are correct, Black narrators carefully created spaces within their stories to relate their own thoughts on ethics, theology, language, and politics among other topics. Consequently, the narratives should be read in general as successful attempts by Black narrators to express thoughts distinct, though not completely independent, from the Western canon. With this claim established, we can better assert that the slave narratives are a significant resource for philosophical work, an idea best put forward by Angela Davis in her "Lectures on Liberation."

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Autobiography" in *The Cambridge Companion to The African American Slave Narrative*, ed. Audrey A. Fisch (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 2007)

## CHAPTER 2: SLAVE NARRATIVES AS IMPORTANT TO CRITICAL PHILOSOPHY

In arguing for the philosophical significance of Black Literature, Davis argues that:

Black Literature in this country and throughout the world projects the consciousness of a people who have been continually denied entrance into the real world of freedom, a people whose struggles and aspirations have exposed the inadequacies not only of the practice of freedom, but also of its very theoretical formulation.<sup>18</sup>

For Davis, African American consciousness by definition challenges the discourse of the Western canon. The efforts of Black people to affirm their humanity in the face of a system that sought to transform them from human beings into objects represents a critique of the Western concept of freedom at the level of theory and praxis. At the level of theory, the African American experience reveals that the concept of human freedom as articulated during the period of Trans-Atlantic slavery was shallow in that it was formulated in tandem with philosophical anthropologies that excluded Africans from being considered as reasonable and therefore deserving of freedom. Most of the major philosophers of the period were articulating structures of human experience that they did not believe applied to all people. Truthfully, they were not able to articulate properly the ways in which different human beings reasoned, or balanced reason with other aspects of human experience to make sense of their world. Davis argues that when we use the insights of Black literature in our philosophy it becomes clear that the focus of the

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<sup>18</sup> Angela Davis, "Lectures on Liberation", 46.

Enlightenment upon reason and human freedom was inseparable from the project of establishing evidence for European global superiority.<sup>19</sup>

At the level of practice Davis argues that the lives of slaves demonstrate the twisted depths to which slave-dependent societies stooped in order to ensure that their theoretical conceptualizations of freedom did not match the new systems that were being constructed in place of the old. When looking at the system of trans-Atlantic slavery we can see that there was little intention by the leaders of Europe to establish a system to guarantee the freedom of all men. The economic opportunities made available to the merchant class of Europeans through the dismantling of the medieval order depended upon the possibility that human beings could be treated like objects. In order to exploit the resources of entire continents, the Europeans had to be sure that they could predictably generate the maximum amount of work from enslaved human beings while contributing as little as possible to their sustenance. Furthermore they needed human beings who would be willing to contribute fully to projects that provided little to no meaning in their lives. In other words, the fulfillment of their ambitions required millions of alienated individuals to endure agony.

However, this was not just any kind of alienation, but an extreme form of alienation which Davis calls “the reduction of a productive and thinking human being to the status of property.” Davis claims that when one looks to the slave narratives for philosophical guidance, one finds a plethora of conceptualizations and thought-patterns that have enabled a people to

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<sup>19</sup> For more on the racist anthropologies of Enlightenment thinkers see S Emanuel Chukwudi, “Eze The Color of Reason: The Idea of Race in Kant’s Anthropology” in *Post-Colonial African Philosophy: A Critical Reader* (Cambridge: Blackwell Publishers:1997), 117-123. Also see Anthony Bogues *Black Heretics, Black Prophets: Radical Political Intellectuals*(Routledge, New York:2003) 27-30

maintain and assert their humanity in the face of an atrocious system.<sup>20</sup> Furthermore, the lives of slaves reveal how Western society has failed to live up to its own ideals.

Davis puts forth Douglass' damning description of his master, Captain Auld's conversion to Christianity as evidence to support her claims about Black consciousness. In the narrative, Douglas states that "prior to his conversion, [Auld] relied upon his own depravity to shield and sustain him in his savage barbarity; but after his conversion, he found religious sanction and support for his slaveholding cruelty."<sup>21</sup> Captain Auld's conversion is not connected to any spiritual revelation of communion with his fellow men through Christ. Instead Davis argues, Christianity merely serves as an ideology by which to justify his action. Whereas previously Auld's only justification was his own despotic impulses, he now could claim that his slaves were sinful and he wanted to save them. Davis argues that if we take this example from Douglass' narrative and reflect broadly on the ideas and trends that lead to the contemporary world we have a piece of evidence for the claim that:

Western society, and particularly the era of the rule of the bourgeoisie, has been characterized by the gap between theory and practice, particularly between freedom as it developed conceptually and the lack of freedom in the real world. The fact that somewhere in one of the foundational documents of this country, there is statement that all men are created equal and the fact that social and political inequality have never been eradicated cannot be regarded as unrelated to the relative nonchalance with which Master Auld discusses the gap between his religious ideas and his day-to-day precepts. The slave holder's own words reveal to us the brutality that underlies not only his particular situation, but that of society in general. We sometimes have to resort to

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<sup>20</sup> See Eric Williams, *Capitalism and Slavery*, (New York: Russel & Russel, 1961) Williams cites how nearly every major economic development of the 18<sup>th</sup> century in England from the rapid expansion of cities to the establishment on the modern banking and credit systems depended upon the torrential flow of goods to and from England due to the Trans-Atlantic slave trade. Cities such as Liverpool prospered directly from the sale of Africans while cities like Birmingham flourished from the massive need for ironworking to make chains, weapons and torture devices.

<sup>21</sup> Quoted in Davis, "Lectures", 69.

the most extreme examples in order to uncover the veiled meanings of the more subtle example.<sup>22</sup>

In Davis' opinion, philosophical reflection on Douglass' description of Master Auld draws attention not only to the difficulties individuals have in living up to their ideals, but if we place Master Auld's conversion in context with the oppressive systems in which Black consciousness was formed, we see that his conversion allows him to enter into the logic of modern Western thought in which reflection and action have become tragically out of sync. The narratives are filled with stories in which the way Westerners think of the universe (and of themselves) do not fit with how they act in the world. She argues that the reader should not separate the fact that Auld adheres to a nation whose ethos and God affirm the equality of all men from the ways in which he treats his slaves. In the case of freedom in the modern world, we are granted insight into just how much dissonance a mind can tolerate when the system which supports it relies on the unfreedom of others. In a way, Davis' reflection on Douglass heralds Gayatri Spivak's "Can the Subaltern Speak" in that Davis identifies how Western thinkers often overlook how their theories harm the very people they say they are trying to assist.<sup>23</sup>

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<sup>22</sup> Davis, "Lectures", 70.

<sup>23</sup> See Gayatri Spivak, "Can the Subaltern Speak?" in *Marxism and the Interpretation of Culture*. Ed. Cary Nelson and Lawrence Grossberg (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1988) 271-313. Accessed February, 23, 2014 [http://www.mcgill.ca/files/crcldaw-discourse/Can\\_the\\_subaltern\\_speak.pdf](http://www.mcgill.ca/files/crcldaw-discourse/Can_the_subaltern_speak.pdf). Gayatri Spivak argues that western post-modernist are still unaware of how influential their voices are over and against those who are oppressed. Intellectuals in the West take up the responsibility to speak for those who are suffering, but are unaware of how their interinstitutional politics harm the Other. Many left-wing scholars fail to balance their genuine desire to help those who suffer due to Western economic interest when their interests are aligned with the west. In order to secure their social and economic position, Western scholars must contribute to the epistemological regime that keeps the establish order in place. This means that their work does not critically subvert the logic of the system that oppresses others. Therefore, claims Spivak, Western scholars co-opt the voice of the oppressed around the world by presenting the lives and worldview of the oppressed in ways that are useful to the agendas of the West.

For Davis, the fact that the slave narratives can make philosophers more aware of how their thoughts align with their actions is one of the most important reasons for taking the insights within the slave narratives seriously. Drawing upon Socrates, she claims that “[he] made a very profound statement when he asserted that the *raison d’être* of philosophy is to teach us proper living.”<sup>24</sup> However, she adds that in our time period “proper living” means liberation from oppression. According to Davis, the modern purpose of philosophy is intertwined at the root with all quests to eradicate oppressive systems in the world. In her view, any attempt to philosophize about freedom divorced from direct resistance against oppression feeds into the ideology of the Western bourgeoisie, which seek to keep the pursuit of freedom as a theoretical activity rather than both theoretical *and* practical. According to Davis, the Black literary tradition has shown time and time again that being free requires active resistance against all systems that seek to drain, rather than sustain the various peoples in the world. If philosophers do not resist the systems of the Western bourgeoisie at the levels of both theory and practice, they will never be able to present to the world the fruit of deep contemplation: an exemplary life. For Davis, Black literature, such as the slave narratives, offers crucial examples of the successful and unsuccessful thoughts and actions of those on the path to living properly.<sup>25</sup>

While Davis’ argument brilliantly demonstrates that philosophical investigation of slave narratives can be fruitful, her analysis falls short when she discusses Douglass’ disenchantment with Christianity. In the passage on which she focuses Douglass states:

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<sup>24</sup> Davis, “Lectures,” 66.

<sup>25</sup> Davis states that “The failures are crucial ,because we do not want to be responsible for the repetition of history in its brutality.” Davis, “Lectures,”65.

I love the pure, peaceable, and impartial Christianity of Christ: I therefore hate the corrupt, slaveholding, women-whipping, cradle-plundering, partial and hypocritical Christianity of this land. Indeed, I can see no reason, but the most deceitful one, for calling the religion of this land Christianity.<sup>26</sup>

Interpreting this statement through a Marxist lens Davis states that Douglass “existentially experiences what Marx theoretically formulates.” She argues that Douglass is finally able to resist his oppressors most efficiently once he is able to “free himself of his religion”. For Davis, Douglass’ self-awareness and rebellious impulses are tied directly to his ability to see through the “veil” of Christian doctrine and to focus on the brutal material conditions of his situation. She claims that it is “not insignificant” that his ability to resist the slave system occurs while he is suffering the most physically (at the slave breaker’s farm). Prior to this situation, Davis argues, Douglas lived in enough luxury to “think in metaphysical categories.” However, faced with the slave breaker’s brutality Douglas is forced to abandon his faith in order to act physically against the slave breaker. Davis does admit that some slave leaders like Nat Turner found the inspiration to rebel in the symbols and stories of Christianity. However, she argues that Douglass’ criticism of his Master’s Christianity and subsequent attack on the slave breaker is evidence that the oppressed must abandon religion in order to organize against their oppressors efficiently and successfully.<sup>27</sup>

There are several flaws in Davis’ reading of Douglass’ criticism. The first is that the passage to which she refers is not a renunciation of Christianity, but the Christianity of slave holders. As Andrews notes, as early as 1789 Blacks used their narratives to criticize European

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<sup>26</sup> Quoted in Davis, “Lectures,” 72.

Christianity and establish the religious superiority of Blacks. He draws our attention to Olaudah Equiano, who, after recalling his first encounters with the atrocities of European slavery, states, “might not an African ask you—Learned you this from your God, who says unto you, Do unto all men as you would men should do unto you?” Andrews argues that this passage and others like it in the narrative serve to demonstrate that the narrator “as ‘African’” has surpassed the white reader in “moral progress and civilization.” It is the Black person who has endured slavery who is more pure than the reader who benefits from the ill-gotten gains of colonialism. In arguing that Douglass’ religious criticism is evidence of an atheistic consciousness, Davis misses that Douglass is most likely *establishing* his closeness to God relative to whites rather than denouncing Christianity as a whole.<sup>28</sup>

Davis also overlooks the role of African spirituality in Douglass’ awakening. In *Antebellum Slave Narratives: Cultural and Political Expressions of Africa*, Jermaine O. Archer argues that “though many whites considered religion and African spirituality to be diametrically opposed, they were not on opposite ends of the spectrum in Douglass’ view.”<sup>29</sup> His evidence for his claim, from *The Narrative of The Life of Frederick Douglas*, is Douglass’ encounter with the man Sandy Jenkins while on Covey’s farm. Before Douglass stands up to Covey he repeatedly tries to escape and is repeatedly recaptured. During his last escape attempt, Douglass receives a magic root from Sandy Jenkins, who claims that it will prevent Douglass from ever being whipped again. When Douglass returns to the farm he notices that Covey is much nicer to him, a

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<sup>27</sup> Davis, “Lectures,” 71-73.

<sup>28</sup> Andrews, “First Fifty Years,” 20

change in attitude which Douglass tentatively attributes to the power of the root. The next time Covey attempts to whip him after his return, is the moment of resistance that sparked Davis' philosophical imagination. For Archer, the fact that Douglass mentions his time with Jenkins demonstrates that Douglass considers his connection to African rituals and customs an important part of his identity. He states that Douglass' "social reality was changed by the belief that Sandy, a gifted conjure doctor, had the ability to effect change through his root remedies."<sup>30</sup> In other words, Douglass' courage to resist Covey came not from his disillusionment with religion as Davis argues, but from the new found belief that the supernatural world may have contained more dimensions than he had previously perceived.

Though Davis does an excellent job of demonstrating how slave narratives can be fruitful resources for building philosophies that transcend the limitations of Western bourgeois consciousness, her desire to fit Douglass into a Marxist framework oversimplifies the narrative. In arguing that Douglass' awakening is founded in materialism, Davis overlooks the ways Black narrators sought to establish themselves as spiritually superior to their oppressors as well as defend the African beliefs and customs of slave culture.<sup>31</sup> If it is true that the narrators found ways to speak their minds through the formal constraints of the white literary establishment, our analysis of them must incorporate the worldviews they advanced to the best of our abilities. This is not to say that one should not use the concepts of the Marxist tradition to engage the narratives

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<sup>29</sup> Jermaine O. Archer. *Antebellum Slave Narratives: Cultural and Political Expressions of Africa* (New York: Routledge, 2009),14.

<sup>30</sup> Archer, *Antebellum Slave Narratives*,12

<sup>31</sup> See Lawrence W. Levine *Black Culture and Black Consciousness: Afro American Folk Thought from Slavery to Freedom* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1977).

philosophically, but we miss opportunities to challenge and expand our own thinking when we too hastily apply Western intellectual frameworks to read the narratives. I hope to demonstrate the philosophical benefits of looking at the narratives on their own terms by providing a short analysis of Odulah Equiano's political philosophy as expressed in his narrative.

### CHAPTER 3: SLAVE NARRATIVES AS CRITICAL POLITICAL PHILOSOPHY

In “Politics and Political Philosophy in the Slave Narrative,” Dickson D. Bruce, Jr., argues that the slave narratives should be read as “intensely political documents” which drew upon the political themes of the revolutionary era, abolitionist ideology and the ideas of freedom developed in slave communities in order to influence the thoughts and actions of their contemporary American public.<sup>32</sup> He states that ultimately “The lives of the fugitives demonstrated not only a superior devotion to freedom, but also a superior understanding of its meaning and significance...The narrators represented the embodiment of an ideal that few Americans could match.”<sup>33</sup> While Bruce does firmly establish that the slave narratives played an important role in shaping the outcome of the slavery debate, he does not significantly investigate the ways in which Black narrators expressed both overt and subtle criticisms of American ideals and practices. Under his reading the voices of the narrators languish under the framework, described by Lewis Gordon earlier, in which Black intellectual work mainly serves to provide experience for white theories.

The most obvious moment in which Bruce overemphasizes the influence of Euro-American political concepts in the slave narratives occurs when he describes the type of freedom expressed in the slave narratives. He states that the “view of freedom embodied in the slave narratives” was the dominant one expressed during the Jacksonian period. Bruce describes the Jacksonian concept of freedom as connected to “ideals of independence...the freedom to do

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<sup>32</sup> Bruce, “Politics,” 28.

<sup>33</sup> Bruce, “Politics,” 42.

whatever one felt to be right or necessary without external restraints...the right to pursue, without restraint, one's own [economic] well-being."<sup>34</sup> Bruce fails to note the ways this vision of freedom could not be expressed without tension in the slave narratives. As Hedin notes, the Black narrators disrupted the traditional individualism of the American narrative by refusing to provide overall closure for their narratives. One finds that many narratives do not end with the narrator's escape from slavery. Instead there are often chapters or "Afterwords" placed after the triumph of escape. In these sections, the authors often describe how they are involved in the abolitionist movement or directly criticize the institution of slavery. Hedin argues that to end at a narrator's escape, a move common in white captivity narratives, would provide a "satisfying finality" for white readers that Black narrators wanted to avoid. He states that the power of the narratives came from the narrator's claim "that his story was not unique, that it represented countless others as well. To end his story while those he represented were still enslaved would falsify those claims."<sup>35</sup> According to Hedin, the narratives are not merely tales of individual triumph over restraints, but a space in which the narrators could present a representative self through which an entire race could be shown as worthy of freedom. In focusing on how the narratives advanced Jacksonian ideas, Bruce misses how many narrators used the structure of their narratives to critique the ideas of their contemporaries.

Furthermore, in describing how the narrators expressed ideas about freedom generated in the slave community, Bruce only focuses on those he feels fit traditional American ideals. He draws the reader's attention to the fact that the slave folklore often involved criticism of the

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<sup>34</sup> Bruce, "Politics," 37.

<sup>35</sup> Hedin, "Strategies of Form," 30.

master-slave relationship. Masters broke contracts at will, punished their slaves brutally over small transgressions, and often ruled through fear rather than reason. However Bruce is quick to state that concern with arbitrary power was always a deep-seated concern in American rhetoric and ideology. Bruce states that by connecting the arbitrary power of the masters to uncontrolled emotions “the authors drew on motifs and themes that go back to the revolutionary era, but, adapting those themes to portrayals of slavery...made them more powerful.”<sup>36</sup> While Bruce is right to argue that Black narrators enriched American political discourse through their narratives, he misses the fact that many slave narrators used their portrayal of hypocritical whites to criticize foundational aspects of the systems whites were constructing. Equiano not only criticizes the ability of Europeans to live up to their own faith, but also links his ability to embrace the customs of Christianity to his African heritage. Pomp, like Nat Turner later, sees no reason to apologize for killing his white master. To claim that Black narrators like Frederick Douglass, Harriet Jacobs, and William Wells Brown expressed Jacksonian ideas about democracy implies that they saw no problem with Jackson’s claim to be expanding democracy “for the people” while simultaneously working to hinder the spread of abolitionist literature, removing Native Americans from their land, and advancing his infamous “spoils” patronage system.<sup>37</sup> In fact, Black intellectuals had long been aware of the tendency for whites to theorize one set of ideals while acting from a different set in their daily lives. In arguing that the narratives can be read as philosophical criticism of theory divorced from action, Davis places the narratives in a more accurate historical context than Bruce. Surveying some of the political philosophy of the era

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<sup>36</sup> Bruce, “Politics,” 38-39.

<sup>37</sup> William Nester, *The Age of Jackson and the art of American Power 1815-1848* (Washington D.C: Potomac Books, 2013), 128-157.

created by free Blacks should shed light on the political thought expressed in the narratives that is missed by Bruce due to his overemphasis on popular American thought. We see that the Black community was not unified in its assessment of the American Enlightenment tradition and its inner contradictions.<sup>38</sup>

On one hand there are the works of Daniel Coker and James Forten who see the contradictions of American thought as a result of the ignorance of whites of their own ideological systems. In “A Dialogue Between a Virginian and an African Minister,” Coker uses a dialogue between a Black minister and a white plantation owner to create the ideal conversation between two rational beings. In defense of slavery, the planter puts forth a range of arguments from Enlightenment property theory, to biblical arguments for slavery, to arguments about the inferiority of the Black race. The minister politely refutes each and every argument using the same intellectual frameworks as the planter. In the end the planter’s faulty logic is fully deconstructed and he does the only reasonable thing in such a situation; he frees his slaves. Coker’s dialogue demonstrates the potential he sees in the concepts of the Enlightenment to lead

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<sup>38</sup> Though the following thinkers were not slaves themselves, the influence of Daniel Coker, James Forten, David Walker and other Black pamphleteers within slave communities should not be under estimated. Bruce states that though slave masters tried to control the flow of information into slave communities, they were usually unsuccessful. Free Blacks often risked their lives to deliver literature and newspapers to literate slaves, who then shared that information with the rest of their community. For Bruce, the connection between slave communities and the rest of the nation meant that slaves were not cocooned from popular American ideas. See Bruce, “Politics,”<sup>37</sup>. However, as Richard Newman notes, free Blacks not only delivered the writing of popular white American intellectuals, but free Black intellectuals as well. Furthermore, Newman claims that the authors of the slave narratives quickly incorporated themselves into Black literary circles soon after their escape. For example, Frederick Douglass goes so far to mention how much admiration he had for James Forten. See Richard Newman, “Introduction: The Theme of Our Contemplation”, in *Pamphlets of Protest*, ed. Richard Newman (New York: Routledge, 2001),1-26.

to the freedom of slaves. According to his dialogue, all white Americans need to do is simply follow the logic of their own traditions to see that slavery is immoral.<sup>39</sup>

Forten, though trying to ameliorate a specific law, also asked Americans to be reasonable and extend the logic of their philosophical system to Blacks. In a set of his letters, he addresses the Legislature of Pennsylvania, a state founded by Quakers, which considered itself to be more committed to the freedom of men than the southern states. The bill in question required that all free blacks entering in the state of Pennsylvania had to be registered within twenty-four hours of their arrival in the state. Any Black person caught without registration papers would be sold into slavery if his “master” was not found. Forten argued that in many ways this law made Pennsylvania worse than the slave states. At least in the slave states a slave could be certain that the principles of the nation’s philosophy and faith did not apply to him. Instead, Forten argued, Blacks who are looking to become full members of American culture find in Pennsylvania that the people who claim to be the strongest advocates for the rights of all men, are still willing to strip them away.

Forten starts his first letter with the principles of the Declaration of Independence brought to their logical conclusion:

We hold this truth to be self-evident, that GOD created all men equal, and is one of the most prominent features in the Declaration of Independence, and in that glorious fabric of collected wisdom, our noble Constitution. This idea embraces the Indian and the European... the white Man and the African, and whatever measures are adopted

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<sup>39</sup> Daniel Coker “A Dialogue Between a Virginian and an African Minister” in *Pamphlets of Protest*, ed. Richard Newman (New York: Routledge, 2001), 53-64.

subversive of this inestimable privilege are in direct violation of the letter and spirit of our Constitution.<sup>40</sup>

Forten argues that the phrase “all men” does indeed mean all peoples. By stating that the Pennsylvania bill is against the “letter” of the Constitution he tries to show the error in logic of the Pennsylvania Legislature. Forten asks how is it that a document can state “All” and yet be interpreted as meaning “some”? If one were to state that “All dogs are mammals, except for Huskies, which are reptiles” in a logic class, that person would be promptly corrected. The teacher would say that if one is going to exclude Huskies from the category of “mammal,” while keeping them in the category of “dog,” the quantifier “all” is incorrect for it renders the initial proposition illogical. Forten is warning that by going against a central truth that the Constitution and Declaration of Independences claim as “self-evident”, the legislature is undermining the foundational logic of the United States, and the legitimacy of their government falls into question. Forten’s implied question is, “why should one be obligated to follow the rules and regulations of a Government system that does not follow the logic of its own principles?”

Forten does not believe that white Americans are so unreasonable as to undermine their own authority and thus throughout the letters, though especially in Letters Two and Four, he states that free blacks pay their taxes, cheerfully follow the laws and are active in their civic duties. His argumentation style suggests that he does not believe that white Pennsylvanians care so little for their own spirituality and philosophy as to pass legislation that is more in the spirit of tyranny than democracy. He hopes that in “[the Pennsylvania] legislature there is a patriotism, humanity and mercy sufficient to crush this attempt upon the civil liberty of freemen.” In

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<sup>40</sup> James Forten, “Series of Letters by a Man of Colour,” in *Pamphlets of Protest*, ed. Richard Newman (New York:

appealing to patriotism, Forten refers to the argument mentioned previously. If the Pennsylvania Legislature does not extend civil liberties to freemen within their own borders, the status of America as a nation comes to be called into question. If the legislatures truly cared about their newly formed nation, they would do everything in their power to ensure that the vision of the founders of a society of free men was brought to fruition. In appealing to their humanity, he hopes to convince them to tap into their empathy, a feeling necessary for any nation to endure. He hopes to make the legislature of Pennsylvania recognize what he has: if the experimental application of Enlightenment thought known as the United States is to succeed, each state must follow through on the positive consequences of Enlightenment reason.<sup>41</sup>

On the other hand, David Walker took quite a different approach to the Enlightenment tradition. For Walker, the same loopholes Forten points out in the logic of Enlightenment thought is grounds for revolutionary action. He argues that the contradictions of American ideology has allowed slaves in the Americas to experience a reality worse than any other condition that man has experienced. He argues that only in the system of transatlantic slavery is an entire group of people excluded from the human family.<sup>42</sup>

Unlike Forten, Walker does not see the American declaration that “all men are created equal” and the removal of Africans from the human family as a contradiction due to ignorance, but one at the heart of the Enlightenment concept of humanity. The first evidence Walker finds for his assertion are classical and biblical forms of slavery. He argues that for all that was wrong

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Routledge, 2001), 67

<sup>41</sup> Forten, “Series of Letters,” 70.

<sup>42</sup> David Walker “Appeal to the Colored Citizens of the World” in *Philosophy Born of Struggle: Anthology of Afro-American Philosophy from 1917*, ed. Leonard Harris Dubuque: Kendall/Hunt Publishing Company 2000), 8.

with the social organization of those time periods, in each epoch slaves were still seen as human. He states the story of Joseph in Egypt, in which the Pharaoh gave him an Egyptian wife and allowed Joseph to travel around Egypt. He cites the story of Moses as well, claiming that “In all probability, Moses would have become Prince Regent to the throne, and no doubt, in process of time but he would have been seated on the throne of Egypt.”<sup>43</sup> He then analyzes the system of slavery in the Roman Republic. He criticizes Thomas Jefferson for arguing that Roman slaves were successful in the arts and sciences because of their whiteness. He states that “everybody who has read history, knows, that as soon as a slave among the Romans obtained his freedom, he could rise to the greatest eminence in the State; and there was no law instituted to hinder a slave from buying his freedom.”<sup>44</sup> Walker then states that though Enlightenment thinkers have overwhelmingly proclaimed that “all men are created equal” is a self-evident truth, their efforts to establish systems around such a principle have fallen short -- even when compared to societies they saw themselves evolving beyond. Walker argues that although pre-modern societies did not believe all men were created equal, in many circumstances there existed real possibilities for any slave to become a valued and human member of society. Due to the fact that pre-modern slave masters still saw their slaves as human beings they were often willing to educate their slaves, give them the space to cultivate their talents and even allowed them to inter-marry with non-slaves. For Walker, the slavery of pre-modern societies proves that there actually was no contradiction within the logic of American Enlightenment philosophy. What seems like a fragmented system was actually unified around the principle that not all peoples deserve to be

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<sup>43</sup> Walker, “Appeal,”9-11.

<sup>44</sup> Walker, “Appeal” 13.

placed under the category “Human.” If the pre-modern understanding of human nature can be understood as “all men are not created equal,” Walker claims that the modern European understanding was actually “All men are created equal. Group X (in this case Africans) are not men.”

He finds further evidence for his claim in how Americans view the Irish and Greeks. He understands that his argument about the modern West’s philosophical anthropology is shocking to his readers, and he states: “Some perhaps may deny, by saying that they never thought or said [Blacks] were not men.” Walker counters:

But do not actions speak louder than words?—have they not made provisions for the Greeks, and Irish? Nations who have never done the least thing for them, while we who have enriched their country with our blood and tears and are in more miseries than any people under heaven...are not seen.<sup>45</sup>

Like Davis, Walker takes the stance that thought must correlate to action or the thought expressed is invalid. He argues that though many Americans may not have believed that they viewed African peoples as inferior, how could they honestly explain their willingness to provide sanctuary for Irish people and Greeks, yet provide nothing for those suffering terribly in their very lands? He argues that it does not take great leaps of logic to look objectively at the condition of the Irish and that of Black people in America and recognize which group most urgently needs the compassion and resources of white Americans.<sup>46</sup> The irony of the American interest in the plight of down-trodden Europeans stings Walker even more when he considers what those people have done for the nation of America compared to Blacks. It is Blacks whose suffering generated

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<sup>45</sup> Walker, “Appeal,” 12.

the material, emotional and cultural resources for the nation's prosperity. White Americans' lack of consideration for the contributions of Blacks to American life is for Walker evidence enough that white American' do not see Blacks as humans.

Walker's realization leads him to condemn the entire Enlightenment project. He compares Europeans before and after their Christianization, stating:

In fact, take them as a body, they are ten times more cruel, avaricious and unmerciful than ever they were; for while they were heathens...it is positively a fact that they were not quite so audacious as to go and take vessel loads of men, women and children, and in cold blood, and through devilishness, throw them into the sea and murder them in all kinds of ways. While they were heathens, they were too ignorant for such barbarity. But being Christians, enlightened and sensible, they are completely prepared for such hellish cruelties. If it were possible, would they not dethrone Jehovah and seat themselves upon his throne? I therefore..., divested of prejudice...advance my suspicion of them, whether they are as good by nature as we are or not.

He claims that for all of the barbarism attributed to Europeans before the arrival of Christianity and the Enlightenment, they were never willing to commit such atrocious acts against colored people of the world. They did not systematically ship people across the ocean, work to exclude them from all participation in society, as well as try to keep them shackled in ignorance. He argues that European's understanding of the human mind mainly served to teach them how to extinguish better the spiritual and mental development of others. Walker claims that the pre-Enlightenment ignorance Europeans had about the capabilities of humans has be replaced by an arrogant form of overreliance on the powers of men. He argues that if Europeans knew where God was, they would go and try to unseat him from his throne. In other words, because Europeans have discovered that the amount of the universe that they are able to understand

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through reason is far greater than they imagined, they deep down believe that there is no need for God in their lives.

The passage from the Declaration of Independence, cited by Forten, illustrates what Walker means. To recall, the quotation from the Declaration of Independence Forten refers to: “We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their creator with certain unalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness.” While Walker does not disagree with the assertion that God created men with certain inalienable rights, he does not agree that this fact is self-evident. He advises the colored people of the world to “never make an attempt to gain our freedom or *natural right*, from under our cruel oppressors and murderers until you see your way clear—when that hour arrives and you move, be not afraid or dismayed; for be you assured that Jesus Christ the King of heaven...will surely go before you... [and will remove] those enemies who have for hundreds of years stolen our *rights*.”<sup>47</sup> Walker’s theological statement is a profound rebuttal of Enlightenment sensibilities. Since the equality of all men in the eyes of God is *not* self-evident before the eyes of men, it is necessary for God to act within the world to enforce the equality of men. The actions of Europeans have proved to him that the reason of men alone is insufficient to liberate mankind from a problem that has been caused by men. In Walker’s view, if Europeans want to circumvent their logic by reducing vast swaths of humanity to inhuman status, then the colonized of the world should put their faith in God over Enlightenment rationality. If the Enlightenment rationality has mainly served to make things worse for the “coloured citizens of the world,” that is, in Walker’s eyes, evidence *for* the belief in a divine creator who will ensure that justice

prevails in this world, rather than a belief that man's mental capacities will properly order his emotions and spirit. The experiments in the application of Enlightenment thought have made him suspicious of the entire agenda of Europeans and whether or not they are as good by nature as people of color. How else, he asks, could people construct systems of thought and practice that have caused such misery to people around the world?

These brief descriptions of Black thought should serve as a corrective to the argument of Bruce. Contrary to his argument, one can see a clear ambivalence about the ideas of the American Enlightenment in some of the most eloquent Black thinkers of the early 19<sup>th</sup> century. Bruce's argument implies that Black thinkers readily tolerated the disconnect between thought and action which Davis critiques in her *Lectures on Liberation*. One could reasonably ask at this point: how can we be certain that David Walker was not just an outlier in his skepticism? It may be that the majority of slaves came to embrace Enlightenment concepts and thus Bruce is correct in portraying the slave narratives as truly embodying American ideals." I restate, I have no problem with reading of the slave narratives as expressions of American philosophy, but the ideas expressed in the slave narratives are more complex than mere re-articulations of Western ideas. This stance will be further substantiated and clarified through the investigation of the concept of human nature expressed in Olaudah Equiano's *Interesting Narrative*.

Before advancing to Equiano's narrative, it will be important to investigate briefly Europe's most famous critic of the Enlightenment, Jean-Jacques Rousseau. In direct contrast to Locke and Hobbes, Rousseau argued that humans were by nature good and that civilization corrupted them. Though Locke and Hobbes disagreed about the nature of humans, they both

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<sup>47</sup> Walker, "Appeal," 11.

agreed that civilization played a positive role in the development of humanity. For Hobbes, civilization provided the rules and communal obligations necessary to keep man's desirous impulses from turning human interaction into a self-destructive free-for all, in which might always made right. Locke, on the other hand, does not see the State emerge as a desperate check to despotism, but as the collective decision of rational individuals who come to realize that each person can accomplish far more in cooperation with others than alone. Both thinkers see the State and society as instrumental to man's ability to make full use of the rights granted to him by nature.<sup>48</sup> Their theories of civilization became the foundation on which many modern states molded themselves, America included. This is why it is important to mention Rousseau: his arguments about the corrupting influence of civilization on naturally good men are as critical of the Enlightenment concepts of "Progress," "Humanity," "Reason," and "Civilization" as Walker is, in some ways. If the argument that the slave narratives provide more for reflection than merely experiential evidence for Western concepts is to be valid, Rousseau's philosophy must be addressed -- if only briefly.<sup>49</sup> Otherwise, it could be all too easy to argue that the critical perspectives offered in the narratives are expressions of ideas already formulated by Rousseau and other such critics of the Enlightenment.

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<sup>48</sup> See Thomas Hobbes *Leviathan: Revised Student Edition*. Ed. Richard Tuck, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996) and John Locke *The Second Treatise of Government and A Letter Concerning Toleration*. Ed. J.W. Gough, (Great Britain: Barnes and Noble, 1966).

<sup>49</sup> For more information about Rousseau's status within the enlightenment tradition see Arthur M. Melzer, *The Natural Goodness of Man: On the System of Rousseau's Thought* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1990), xii . Melzer claims: "Of course, Rousseau was not simply the first to cry stop to modernization, since many had done so before him in the name of the *ancient regime* and the old monarchic and Christian principles. But he was the first to do so as a more advanced adherent of the new modern ideas. The Enlightenment and the new Party of Reason had plenty of enemies; Rousseau was its first defector, its first "dialectical opponent." His defection, moreover, turned out to be the founding event of a since unbroken tradition of modern self-hatred, of protest against modernity arising from within the modern camp...In other words, Rousseau became the prototype of the modern alienated intellectual:

One of the most important passages for gleaning insight on Rousseau's views of the relation between human nature and civilization occurs in his argument about the origins of inequality. Rousseau argues that philosophers would truly understand human nature if they could see that the default human feeling is, "do what is good for you with the least possible harm to others." He argues that "although it may behoove Socrates and minds of his stamp to acquire virtue through reason, the human race would have perished long ago if its preservation had depended only on the reasoning's of its members."<sup>50</sup> Like the Black thinkers discussed so far, Rousseau also sees the limitations of Enlightenment rationality in dealing with the problem of inequality. Rousseau argues that in the state of nature humans are more interested in protecting themselves than in trying to force others to do their bidding. In fact, he argues, in the state of nature there was no way for humans to commit the level of heinous crimes seen in modern civilization. Rousseau believes that in the state of nature the minds of men could hold only a fleeting attention to things that were beyond their basic desires. If one human tried to enslave another, the other human had merely to wait until the attention of his captor was distracted to run away and achieve his freedom. With no kinds of obligations to one another, men were essentially free to do as they pleased.

After establishing humanity's natural temperament and behavior, he moves on to his most infamous argument about the role of civilization in man's corruption. He argues:

since the bonds of servitude are formed only in the mutual dependence of men and the reciprocal needs that unite them, it is impossible to enslave

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the thinker who agrees with the modern rejection of the classical and Christian worlds, but who nevertheless loathes the new world that these modern ideas have created".

<sup>50</sup> Jean-Jacques Rousseau, "Discourse on the Origins of Inequality" in *The Collected Writings of Rousseau*, ed. Roger D. Masters and Christopher Kelly, trans. Judith R. Bush, Roger D. Masters et al. (London: University of New England Press, 1992), 38.

a man without first putting him in the position of being unable to do without another; a situation which, as it did not exist in the state of Nature, leaves each man there free of the yoke, and renders vain the Law of the stronger.<sup>51</sup>

For Rousseau, it is only in the state of interdependence that humans become vulnerable to the most heinous forms of oppression. In Rousseau's depiction of human nature, humans have no real desire to oppress others because they are mainly interested in satisfying their own immediate needs. Furthermore, without a sense of deep obligation to one another, humans are free to leave any oppressive situations in which they find themselves. For example, let us consider the phenomenon of specialization. Rousseau argues that in the state of nature, each person was generally responsible for his own health. If he ever needed any herbs from anyone else, he only needed to strike up some kind of deal that fit with his immediate circumstances. However, currently most humans have little understanding of how to maintain their own health. Instead we have specialists called "doctors" who have far more knowledge about the human body than others and have authority regarding what illnesses are and the cures for them. The expectation is that for their specialized ability to keep us in good health we are obligated to pay them money. This dynamic is where the problem arises for Rousseau. What happens if the doctor suddenly decides that rather than have you pay him money he wants you to move things around his house for a few months? Since you have lost the ability to look after your own health, you must do what the doctor says or suffer the burden of poor health. Now one could easily say that the mediation of the State prevents situations like this from occurring. However, what happens if the doctor has more influence with the people that run government than you do, or what if the government

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<sup>51</sup>Rousseau, "Discourse," 42.

decides to exact a heavy toll for your protection -- military service for example? Now, in order to be healed regularly you must perpetuate violence for causes in which you may not believe. Rousseau argues that this is the process by which man's increasing complex web of social obligations brings out the worst in his nature. Contrary to Hobbes' argument, it is once we are dependent on one another that the "law of stronger" can do the most damage to humans. The more reliant a person becomes on others for their survival, the less he can resist coercion. The inability to resist coercion leads to increasing inequality as those with superior ability continually increase their dominance over those with whom they are in relationship. These social inequalities become more lopsided over time as the imbalances established in one generation are transferred to the next and built upon.

In Equiano's *Interesting Narrative*, a quite different picture of human nature emerges. Equiano does not implicate civilization or the idea of society in the corruption of human nature, but *slavery* in particular. By investigating this slave narrative and the culture from which it emerged, I hope to show that the slave narratives represent a moment in which slaves articulated more than Western concepts and expressed ideas which were uniquely their own.

The *Narrative* of Olaudah Equiano is one of the first major slave narratives published during the Enlightenment period to address the dehumanizing effect of slavery on slave owners. In the narrative Equiano describes his development from being a young man who is kidnapped, transported across Africa and eventually sold to European slave traders, to an adult who is fully self-aware of his status as one of God's chosen. When he describes the capacity for cruelty that he encounters during his experience of slavery he argues:

Such a tendency has the slave-trade to debauch men's minds, and harden them to every feeling of humanity! For I will not suppose that the dealers in slaves are born worse than other men—No; it is the fatality of this

mistaken avarice, that it corrupts the milk of human kindness and turns it into gall. And, had the pursuits of those men been different, they might have been as generous, as tender-hearted and just as they are unfeeling, rapacious and cruel. Surely this traffic can be no good which spreads like a pestilence and taints everything it touches! Which violates the first natural right of mankind, equality and independency, and gives one man a dominion over his fellows God never intended! For it raises the owner to a state as far above man as it depresses the slave below it; and with all the presumption of human pride, sets a distinction between them immeasurable in extent, and endless in duration.<sup>52</sup>

In this statement one finds an argument between Forten's efforts to use Enlightenment concepts to convince Americans to follow their own values and Walker's suspicion of whether or not Europeans are as good by nature as people of color. Equiano refuses to assert that those involved in the slave trade were cruel men who were attracted to a cruel enterprise. He argues that when a man has a type of dominion over others that violates the God-given rights of the people he controls, he will inevitably become cruel. Being successful in the slave trade means being so removed from the natural connections involved in human life that one becomes hardened. Unlike Forten, Equiano does not opt to remind his readers of the philosophy they hold, but argues how the slave trade itself is responsible for the inability of Europeans to follow through with the implications of their own philosophies and theologies. It is the heart that becomes hard for Equiano, not the mind that becomes ignorant of contradictions. Equiano also differs from Walker in that he does not attribute the coldness he observes in white people to their nature. He states that if the men he encountered had been involved in different professions they would have

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<sup>52</sup>Olaudah Equiano, "The Interesting Narrative of the Life of Olaudah Equiano or Gustavus Vasa, the African Written by Himself" in *Slave Narratives* ed. William L. Andrews and Henry Louis Gates Jr., (New York: Literary Classics of The United States, 2001), 127 .

behaved more humanely. Equiano also argues that slavery, as it exists in his time period, has a distinct “taint” whose source is human arrogance.

Also, Equiano differs with Rousseau in that he does not see the problem of inequality as arising from interdependent human relationships in themselves. It is the unnatural relationship of chattel slavery, “which God never intended,” that has made Europeans capable of monstrous deeds both large and small. While Equiano does state that man has a natural right to equality and independence, he never claims that relationships of obligation in themselves cause the cold-hearted cruelty he observes in Europeans and Americans. In fact, Equiano mentions his experience in Africa as a slave earlier in the narrative but does not bring down the kind of condemnations he does on the Europeans. He describes an incident of his childhood slavery in Africa where he runs away from his African master. He fears he will flogged for his disobedience, but he is only slightly reprimanded instead. Though he is not happy to be a slave, for he was born free, his experience in African slavery is a far cry from the perversion he witnesses in the European slave trade.<sup>53</sup> *Black Odyssey*, by Nathan Irving Huggins, provides another good insight into how slavery existed in the world Equiano inhabited prior to his enslavement by Europeans. Though slaves did not have the freedom of normal citizens of the village, there was always the possibility that they “might merge into the family through marriage.”<sup>54</sup> The African concept of slavery was quite similar to the biblical and classical concepts of slavery discussed by Walker. Slaves were generally viewed as additions to the community and had the potential to join the community as full members. The families to which

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<sup>53</sup> Equiano, “Interesting Narrative,” 68-69.

slaves belonged to did not see them as “items” that had little value other than their capacity to produce capital. Though Equiano is eventually sold by his master, he never mentions any of the brutality he later condemns in the Western system of slavery. Equiano’s description of his African enslavement serves as a contrast which brings to light the unique depravity of European slavery.

What he sees as wrong with European slavery above all is that it creates a distinction between men that is “immeasurable in extent and endless in duration.” By “immeasurable in extent,” Equiano prefigures Walker in pointing out that Africans are removed from the human family in the practice of European slavery. In other forms of slavery, slaves were still viewed as human. Though slaves were not considered equal, there were often clear pathways to participating in society. Slaves were viewed capable of more than just labor, and thus were allowed to intermarry with the dominant culture and participate in society. To use David Walker’s reading of the biblical Joseph as an example, we can see that the Pharaoh was free to give Joseph the independence and the resources needed to actualize whatever potential the Pharaoh saw in Joseph. However, in European chattel slavery, there is no way for slaves to be recognized as a full human beings in relation to their masters. When Equiano speaks of the “immeasurable extent” to which slaves are separated from their masters, he refers to the ways in which the relational bonds that make up human families and communities were fractured by slavery due to the fact that Africans were not considered human. To illustrate his point he tells the story of a French planter in Martinique who proudly boasted about how many of his slaves

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<sup>54</sup> Nathaniel Irving Huggins , *Black Odyssey: The Afro-American Ordeal in Slavery*,( New York: Pantheon Books, 1977), 8.

were fathered by him.<sup>55</sup> In response to this tale Equiano asks, “Are these sons and daughters of the French planter less his children by being begotten on a black woman?” Equiano implies that in order to keep his own children in a state of squalor and ignorance, the slave master must suppress all of his paternal feelings toward his children. Equiano shows that in contrast to other forms of slavery, the slave master must ignore the natural instinct to connect to his own offspring, if he is to be successful economically. He must put himself at such great emotional distance from the people working under him that the bonds he forms with them are bound to become corrupt and sadistic.

By “endless in duration,” Equiano refers to the concept of freedom involved in European chattel slavery. As repeated throughout this essay, in the pre-modern concept of slavery, slavery did not have to last forever. However, once Europeans associated blackness with being subhuman, slaves were expected to remain in their positions eternally. When a slave was bought it was legally sanctioned and generally expected that any of the slave’s progeny would remain slaves as well. In theory, the child of a slave had the same expectations for little to no participation in the wider socio-political community as the parents did. In addition, and more heinous -- as Forten also argued -- even if a slave managed to achieve freedom, there was no guarantee that the slave could maintain it.

Equiano tells the tale of Joseph Clipson to highlight the hollow concept of freedom operating in European slavery. Clipson was a free mulatto who worked alongside Equiano as a sailor. Equiano states that Clipson had been a part of his crew for a long time and everyone on Equiano’s ship and on Clipson’s home island knew he had been born free. However, there

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<sup>55</sup> Equiano, “Interesting Narrative,” 126.

arrives a moment in which Clipson is spotted by another captain who proclaims that Clipson was a runaway and was to be taken off the ship. Clipson produces his birth certificate which clearly stated his status as a free mulatto, yet he is still taken off the ship. He asked to be brought before an official to which his captors agreed, “but instead of that, they carried him on board of the other vessel: and the next day, without giving the poor man any hearing on shore, or suffering him even to see his wife or child, he was carried away,” Equiano laments. He then asserts that he has witnessed many men captured in a similar way. After describing the grave situation faced by Black free men in the New World, Equiano argues “is it surprising that slaves, when mildly treated, should prefer to misery of slavery to such a mockery of freedom?”<sup>56</sup> The echo of Equiano’s question reverberates in his criticism of chattel slavery’s “endless duration.” That a person can be kept unfree indefinitely is the source of the startling lack of respect for human freedom which Equiano observes in many of the whites he encounters. The exclusion from the human family and society, upon which the objectification of slaves rested, ensured that no Black person could ever truly escape slavery. For Black men and women to exist within the colonial system with their freedom unquestioned would have represented a challenge to the Enlightenment concept of human that excluded blacks and the entire slave system. Therefore it was important for freedom always to remain a status riddled with insecurity for Black people. With few means for slaves to integrate into society, masters could continue to squeeze the most resources out of their slave populations as possible.

When Equiano evokes the right of “independence,” it may appear that he is expressing the same idea as his white contemporaries. However, the concept of independence at work in

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<sup>56</sup> Equiano, “Interesting Narrative,” 136-137.

Equiano is not freedom *from* all obligations toward others as expressed by Rousseau, but the freedom *to* be in fulfilling relationships with others. When Equiano mentions the immoral behavior of slaves; it is in reference to the terrible behavior of whites in particular, not obligations in general. He states:

When you make men slaves you deprive them of half their virtue, you set them in your own conduct an example of fraud, rapine and cruelty...by changing your conduct, and treating your slaves as men, every cause of fear would be banished. They would be faithful, honest, intelligent and vigorous; peace, prosperity and happiness would attend you.

Equiano implies that if European slave masters behaved more humanely towards their slaves they would find peace and prosperity. Equiano places the cause of inequality upon the failure of slave masters to recognize the humanity in their slaves, rather than upon the bonds of civilization, as Rousseau argues. One could imagine Equiano replying to Rousseau that while the complex nature of social organization prevents the slave from securing his freedom, i.e., laws, slave patrols etc., it is Europeans in particular who decided that the relationship between human beings should involve objectification. Therefore, Equiano would argue, human beings can begin to live closer to the natural relationships ordained by God once they abolish the slave trade. While Rousseau does eventually attempt to construct a design of the proper government, he still sees civilization as a problem to be mitigated. Equiano never mentions civilization as the problem, and this is not for lack of cultural resources. One could easily imagine his tale taking a more pessimistic view of human nature, in which inequality is a problem only the grace of God can solve. His narrative could still have been acceptable and even incorporated into missionary projects had he chosen to focus on the inability of Godless men to be redeemed. However, he does not see oppressive systems emerging out of a defect in human relationships as Rousseau

does. Rather, Equiano seeks to establish that relationships have the potential to bring out the worst *as well as* the best in people.

Furthermore, it is likely that Equiano's view of the relationship between independence and relationships was influenced by the African culture from which he emerges. Huggins, in describing the lives of West Africans prior to slavery, gives an excellent vision of the view of self that Equiano likely had. His description goes as follows:

Isolation was unthinkable. Alone, awesome nature was a threat more than a blessing. Alone, one was helpless before all that was unknown... Besides, alone a person was a nobody... What one was or was known to be rested on others. The bloodlines and associations that made up the village were a finely spun web, firmly and distinctly linking all together. The self, who one was, was of the village... The African was thus living in a web of interrelationships wherein personality was defined, and the possibilities of growth or change circumscribed. The web of relationships extended far and gave one a sense of place and certainty. But it tied one to obligations and duties, and made the concept of individual freedom the fantasy of a lunatic.<sup>57</sup>

It is more likely that Equiano saw human nature as fundamentally one of relation, in which connections with others provided the pathways for the fulfillment of human potential. Though he does mention "independence" as a natural right, he likely does not have in mind the Western notion of being able to fulfill one's desires unhindered. His use of "independent" must be placed in context with his criticism of the "immeasurable" distance chattel slavery placed between men and "endless duration" Blacks were expected to live without being fully free. If the fatal flaw in

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<sup>57</sup> Huggins, "Black Odyssey," 5-7 Huggins makes it clear that not all African societies viewed the self the same way. In his book he seeks to give an idea of the general sense of order in the lives of slaves ruptured by the slave trade. Though the extent to which African culture groups value a communal sense of self over an individual sense of self is debated. There seems to be a general consensus though that the African sense of self is much more inter-relational than the modern European sense of self. For the most recent arguments of this debates see Ifeanyi A. Menkiti, "On the Normative Conception of a Person" and Didier N. Kaphagawani "African Conceptions of a Person A Critical Survey" in *A Companion to African Philosophy*, ed. Kwasi Wiredu(London: Blackwell Publishing Ltd, 2004)

the slavery system is that it transforms the relationship between people from “person—person” to “person-object,” the right of “independence” becomes more about the capacity for people to be fully included in society and validated for their individual talents and contributions, than a pre-social disposition in man that generates corruption in civilization.<sup>58</sup>

Through Bruce’s project does much to establish that the slave narratives were documents that shaped the early American political life, his analysis divests those narrators of philosophical significance. His claim that the slave narratives articulated Jacksonian ideas of self and democracy prevents us from seeing the ways in which Black narrators were some of the earliest critics of Enlightenment philosophies. While some Black thinkers, such as Coker and Forten attempted to end slavery by appealing to the Enlightenment principles, David Walker argued that the colored people in the world should turn a skeptical eye to the Enlightenment and deepen their devotion to God. When read in this context, Equiano’s *Interesting Narrative* can provide more philosophically interesting insights than we find under the framework provided by Bruce. Instead of merely articulating the Enlightenment theories, Equiano put forward his own philosophy of human nature and social organization. He argued that chattel slavery was a deep perversion of the type of relationships humans were supposed to live in. Unlike Rousseau, he does not see human relationships in themselves as the cause of chattel slavery. In fact, Equiano argues that the only way for humans to reach the highest levels of prosperity is for Europeans and Africans to move toward the kinds of person-to-person relationships sanctioned by God. For Equiano, Humans are

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<sup>58</sup> Equiano’s fondness for his own culture most clearly found in the first chapter of the *Interesting Narrative*. He repeatedly connects the practices of his own culture to that of the Greeks and Jews. This has been interpreted by some scholars as a means of establishing that his African cultural background is just as essential to his successful life as the Western culture he encounters through slavery. For more on this topic see Babacar M’Baye, *The Trickster*

in relationships in the state of nature; therefore all attempts to turn men into property are  
perverse.

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*Comes West: Pan-African Influence in Early Black Diasporan Narratives*(Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, Jackson2009).

## CONCLUSION

The goal of this essay is not to make definitive claims about the philosophical content of the slave narratives, but to demonstrate the fecundity of allowing these texts to speak for themselves. As Davis argued, Black literature expresses the consciousness of a people who have been systematically denied the opportunity to live freely as human beings. The authors of the slave narratives found ways to circumvent the restrictions of the white abolitionist literary establishment, and expressed their own ideas about the social structures from which their suffering arose. By studying the thoughts and experiences of Black narrators, one can gain great insight not only into the methods by human development is restricted, but also on how such methods can be countered.

However, when Davis reflects on what Frederick Douglass' criticisms of white Christianity mean for those seeking liberation, she claims that Douglass is only able to resist Mr. Covey effectively when he abandons his religion. Unfortunately her Marxist interpretation misses the fact that criticism of Christianity was established in the genre decades before Douglass wrote his narrative. As Andrews notes, slave narrators used their criticism of white Christianity to establish that they were *more* religious than their masters, not less. Furthermore, Douglass mentions the magic root he received from Sandy Jenkins which he states gave him assurance he needed to resist Mr. Covey. We see that instead of abandoning his religion, Douglass actually discovers new spiritual resources that give him the strength to resist Mr. Covey. Though her defense of Black literature is excellent, by attributing Douglass' critical attitude toward Christianity to atheism, Davis misses the forms of spirituality Douglass believed were essential to his liberation. Though Davis is right to argue that the slave narratives are philosophically

significant, her reading of Douglass' narrative sacrifices his unique perspective in order to make the work fit a Marxist framework.

My reading of Equiano's *Interesting Narrative* serves as an alternative vision of what doing philosophy with slave narratives can look like. When distinguished from the European and American thinkers of his time, we see that Equiano advocated a fascinating theory of human nature. He argued that some human relationships are natural and sanctioned by God, while others are unnatural and bring out the worst in people. For Equiano, chattel slavery perverted the natural instincts of slave masters and made them capable of terrible acts of cruelty. This is why whites could claim to abide by the principles of Christianity and the Enlightenment while betraying those very same principles in their daily actions toward Blacks. In Equiano's view, abolishing chattel slavery was the only way that the whites involved could begin to adhere to the logic of their own belief systems. Unlike Rousseau, Equiano does not ask us to reflect on how all complex relationships are the origins of inequality, but on what steps must be taken so that we may live in the kinds of relationships that foster ethical behavior.

It is my hope that I have properly demonstrated what is lost when one is too quick to apply Western theories to the slave narratives. If Davis is correct to argue that the slave narratives can guide philosophers as they think about how to live, then philosophers must closely consider the arguments made by these texts. Otherwise, invaluable knowledge about how oppressive systems affect the heart and minds of those involved will remain unrecoverable.

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