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RELIGION, COMMERCIALISM, AND IDENTITY IN EQUIANO AND DOUGLASS'S
NARRATIVES

by

Ashley Mueth

B.A., Southern Illinois University, 2022

A Research Paper

Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the
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A Research Paper Submitted in Partial

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Approved by:

Dr. George Boulukos, Chair

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TITLE: RELIGION, COMMERCIALISM, AND IDENTITY IN EQUIANO AND DOUGLASS'S *NARRATIVES*

MAJOR PROFESSOR: Dr. George Boulukos

Slave narratives, involving enslaved persons, tell the personal accounts of the lives and struggles faced by Africans during the slave trade. From the eighteenth to the nineteenth century, the abolitionist movement evolved, resulting in anti-slavery campaigns across the United States and Europe. In this paper, I will analyze two renowned slave narratives, first Olaudah Equiano's *The Interesting Narrative* and secondly, Frederick Douglass's *Narrative of the Life*. I argue that in Equiano's discourses he appeals to authority figures to advocate against slavery, however Douglass distrusts authority figures and determines that slaveowners are complicit in maintaining systems of oppression. This article addresses the economic, literary/social, and religious discourses that emerge in both slave narratives to understand the voices against the slave trade, especially pro-slavery rhetoric.

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

<u>CHAPTER</u>	<u>PAGE</u>
ABSTRACT	i
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS.....	ii
ESSAY – Religion, Commercialism, and Identity in Equiano and Douglass’s <i>Narratives</i>	1
WORKS CITED... ..	16
VITA.....	19

RELIGION, COMMERCIALISM, AND IDENTITY IN EQUIANO AND DOUGLASS'S NARRATIVES

Over fifty years after Equiano wrote petitions against the transatlantic slave trade, Douglass published his autobiography to draw attention to the atrocities of enslavement in the United States. During the antislavery movement in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries in Britain and the United States, religious, literary, and economic discourses played a crucial role in proslavery and antislavery arguments made by slaveholders and abolitionists. In Olaudah Equiano's *Interesting Narrative*, Equiano employs rhetoric through Christian conversion and Quaker education, expressing a desire for African people to receive God's grace. Frederick Douglass, in his eponymous *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass*, acknowledges that slaveholders use Christianity to justify the slavery of African Americans. Whereas Equiano calls on Robert, the Bishop of London, the Lords Commissioners, and the Queen to continue their acts of benevolence in favor of freeing slaves from bondage, Douglass deconstructs a slaveholder's authority of power, specifically Edward Covey's authority. Equiano addresses the traffic of slavery by the British government whereas Douglass joins the abolitionist movement as an orator, after becoming a fugitive runaway and changing his surname from Bailey to Douglass. In Equiano's *Interesting Narrative* and Douglass' *Narrative*, I argue that Equiano utilizes a hybrid discourse between his British and African identities within religious and economic discourses (Bozeman 68), whereas Douglass internalizes his slaveholder's identity to forge his defiance and rejects the slaveholder's justification of slavery through various discourses (Brewton 709). In other words, Equiano appeals to authority figures for support in his anti-slavery campaign, whereas Douglass insists upon authority figures as complicit in maintaining slavery and systems of oppression, through economic, literary/social, and religious discourses.

Experiencing violence on land is crucial to Equiano's understanding of slavery and

systems of oppression. In W.E.B. Du Bois's *The Souls of Black Folk*, he defines double-consciousness as a sensation of “complex feeling[s] of two-ness” that Africans identify with (Pittmann). Africans will measure and perceive themselves through the watchful eyes of the public, the same public that detests and pities them. The double-consciousness is both African and White sensations of feeling. Olaudah Equiano's *Interesting Narrative* explores DuBois's coined “double consciousness” in that Equiano constructs different versions of his identities on land and sea. On land, Equiano experiences the violent acts of the South's slave market in the plantation economy. In Georgia and Charlestown, Equiano is poorly paid when he offers assistance to a gentleman, helping the man drift a boat across the water (128). Equiano attempts to pass the worthless copper he received in the market to make a small profit. However, the white men almost flog him without a fair trial. The plantation American South presents Equiano as African, without voice, without civil rights. White slave owners and traders will violently harm him and use him laboriously. On land, Equiano has no British identity, so he must resist flogging by returning to his ship and securing the safety of his captain. However, Equiano is helpless in escaping other experiences of abuse.

Since Equiano experiences the violence of plantation slavery in the South, he concludes that the systems of oppression force him to become property, without agency, in which no captain can save him. For example, Equiano travels to Savannah, Georgia and is beaten and wounded by Doctor Perkins and another white man (129). Equiano's captain sends for a doctor, and Equiano is nursed by Doctor Brady (130). On land, Equiano is property in the plantation American South. As property, he must play to the audience's sympathy. Equiano does so by differentiating Doctor Brady's kindness in healing him with Dr. Perkins refusal to help him. Equiano plays on good vs. evil morality dynamics to guide white abolitionists to help enslaved people and to record the atrocities of slavery against Africans. On land, Equiano is put in

danger. However, in his writing, he receives sympathy from good people that pity him by illustrating the evils perpetrated against him. However, on the sea, Equiano is given respect. Simmons defines the laws of place and displacement of the proper. On land, Equiano is only “a negro” and has no control or agency for himself. On the sea, Equiano has a “unique authority” due to being an intellectual and sailor (Simmons 78). On the sea, Equiano works in various roles, in exchange for money, and sells his goods, to become a freedman (Equiano 133). On the sea, Equiano exists in a contrasting reality, a reality that is alternative or displaced from the laws of place. Within the laws of place, slaveowners dominate and regulate the land, however on sea, distinguished sailors' rule (Simmons 78-79). In other words, on the sea, Equiano is employed, communicative with sailors, and trades goods while utilizing economic discourses along trade routes. On the land, different rules apply, and slaveowners will harm him because he is not useful, like he is on the sea, in providing knowledge and skills that are beneficial to other sailors.

On land, Equiano must be perceived as a gentleman to obstruct violence against himself. Through interactions with Capt. O' Hara and Miss Guerin, Equiano is taught British social customs and business to enhance his Briton identity. Equiano learns hairdressing and begins to play the French-horn. In the evenings, Equiano practices the French-horn, engaging in a leisurely activity, instead of being subjected to harsh working conditions. Equiano is instructed in arithmetic to improve his education and employment opportunities (166). Capt. O' Hara and Miss Guerin provide Equiano opportunities to improve his likelihood of avoiding slavery's worst vices. Capt. O' Hara and Miss Guerin provide Equiano tools to elevate his position—education, employment, and British social customs. He is taught the middle-class lifestyle. However, Equiano realizes that he is paid the lowest amount he has ever earned, so he returns to the sea (166). He cannot buy his freedom in this environment. Equiano wants to break free from enslavement, not be promised better treatment in the confinements of slavery. Although

Equiano fails to procure his freedom on land, he utilizes his learned gentlemanly skills to secure a good position on sea. For example, he dresses up in nice clothing and uses English dialect to portray himself as a civilized man. A gentleman hires Equiano immediately, proving to Equiano that inheriting British customs and skill sets will improve his position (as a Black), especially on the sea (167). Waldstreicher argues that in the Black Atlantic, slaves and servants used disguises to transform themselves into people with alternate identities. Slaves changed their original names to adopt more British-sounding names. Slaves became “gentleman” by using the English language and British mannerisms practiced by actual gentlemen. Here, we see that Equiano learns these skills because he hopes to be perceived as civilized. Equiano learns the economic and social discourses of British people to prevent violence enacted upon him. Social hierarchies place slaves and Africans into different positions of violence and oppression. Equiano hoped to improve his condition by adopting British customs, languages, and skills, or assimilating into British society.

In Equiano’s assimilation into society, he becomes a champion for justice and freedom of the African people. Equiano uses names and good behavior to emancipate Annis, a servant of Mr. Kirkpatrick that “parted [the plantation] by consent” to join Equiano’s ship at Union-stairs” (180). However, Mr. Kirkpatrick forcibly removes Annis from Equiano’s ship. Equiano uses a disguise to help Annis receive justice, since he is a freedman. Equiano “presences” himself in various situations as Vassa or Equiano—to give him an advantage. Again, Equiano takes on double-consciousness, in which he experiences a dual self-perception or two different identities to navigate the world around him. To help Annis, Equiano uses deception with a “whitened face”(180) to procure Annis a court trial to gain his liberty. In Equiano’s performance, Equiano has a gentleman impersonate Annis, so that Annis “was admitt[ed] into the house and conducted to a judge” (180). Equiano is instructed by Granville Sharp to argue for

Annis's liberty in court, showing that British identity and language implements justice.

However, Equiano's deception fails. Both Equiano and Annis are punished—the attorney takes

Equiano's money and Annis is cut, flogged, and chained (181). However, in taking on a

gentlemanly persona and defending Annis like lawyers do, Equiano receives a less severe

punishment than Annis. Annis is promised freedom and forced into plantation slavery, again.

Unlike Equiano, Annis does not adopt a British identity or the gentlemanly language, so he is

perceived as uncivilized, and therefore deserving of worse treatment. Even though Equiano

encourages gentlemanly behavior to be perceived as a civilized black, this act alone cannot stop

the legal system from failing Africans. Equiano takes other actions to petition against the slave

trade. He petitions to government officials to reduce violence enacted upon Africans and boldly

presents the benefits of ending the slave trade. In Equiano's petitions to the Bishop of London,

the Lords Commissioners, and the Queen, he discloses his disappointment in institutional

power, but believes that the government can right their wrongs, or uphold their proclaimed

virtues. Equiano critiques the mismanaged expeditions to Africa that attempt to civilize

Africans and convert them to Christianity. After Equiano returns to London, he comments on

his failed expedition to Sierra Leona to help the black poor in Africa (Equiano 226). In

astonished and pained revelations, Equiano announces that the agents abused the people on

board the ship. He discloses that only the necessities of 426 people were sent, so that people

could not survive the journey (227-228). The government employed the agent, so the

expedition's failure reflects poorly on the government's participation in ending poverty in

Africa. Equiano emphasizes that both the government and the people onboard the ship suffered

from the agent's scheme. Due to this mismanagement, many people experienced

malnourishment, and Africa's lands could not be cultivated for agricultural production.

Although the goal of this expedition was to provide the black poor in Africa education,

provisions, and Christianity while converting the Africans to “the faith of Jesus Christ,” Equiano loses hope in this ultimate goal (Equiano 223). On many levels, Equiano is angry with the government but asks them to practice their supposed virtues. At the institutional level, the British government is failing the people. He emphasizes that the “gentleman in power” (232) should use “the elevation of their rank, and the dignity of their stations” (232) to practice their proclaimed virtues. In other words, those in power should be role models without generating political corruption. He implores the Queen to elevate the condition of slaves to men (Equiano 232) so that she feels pleasure in their happiness. In Equiano’s approach, he directly addresses the powerful government because he recognizes that they can reform human rights most directly. The government can end slavery and/or the Atlantic slave trade by eliminating captivity, kidnapping, human trafficking, and torture used against Africans.

At times, Equiano is controversial. He simultaneously requests Africans convert to Christianity and assimilate into British society but argues against the slave trade. Equiano does so, to appeal to British middle-class audiences but to end the slave trade and assist the African community. He utilizes Christian conversion and Quaker education to argue with the British government, while assimilating into British culture to strengthen his public position and respectability. In two ways, Equiano perceives abolition as a universal good for not only Africans, but British manufactures also (234). In his argument, Equiano highlights the increased benefits to manufacturing and production by ending the African slave trade. By establishing a “system of commerce” in Africa, the “demand for manufacturers” will increase, and the native Africans will adopt British customs and society (Equiano 233). Developing a network of safe trade among Africa, the Americas, and Europe, will provide wealth and prosperity to these countries. Africa provides valuable and useful resources to British manufacturers, but consumption of these materials must be carefully extracted due to “the wear and tear of [the]

African] continent” (Equiano 233). During the Atlantic slave trade, the African landscape changed due to the transformation of market and trade (DeCorse). Equiano brings awareness to these social relationships in which “trading upon safe grounds” existed between communities before consumption and greed grew (Equiano 234). In the early stages of the slave trade, Great Britain and the Americas demanded free labor through “slave-based plantation economies,” and want of cotton and indigo production in Africa (DeCorse 137). Both Equiano and DeCorse recognize that safe trading existed between communities, however, the changing economic and early capitalist markets demanded free labor, in order for profit and prompt production to exist. To combat this argument, Equiano proposes “a system of commerce” for Africans to assimilate into British society, become paid employees, and increase manufacturing and production for British markets. Through the transatlantic market, the Americans, Europeans, and Africans will safely trade resources and provide various goods. To further persuade the British government, Equiano emphasizes that Africa is rich in resources and that employing manufactures will supply the African markets for British consumption (234). To strengthen Equiano’s position, Equiano unites religious and legal discourses to argue for the abolitionist movement.

In Britain, abolitionists began challenging slavery in legal courts by focusing on baptism and the kidnapping of Africans to gain public attention. In the legal case, *Somerset v. Stewart*, Somerset argued against Captain John Knowles forcing him into servitude by “writ of habeas corpus” (The *Somerset v. Stewart* Case). Habeas corpus meant “you may have the body” and in the seventeenth-century, habeas corpus, “protect[ed] [a prisoner] from false imprisonment”. During the ruling, Mansfield declared Somerset free from enslavement, because habeas corpus was “a constitutional right” to resist “deportation and sale” as property if a person was already a servant. Free Blacks spread information about this ruling to enslaved blacks and used the legal ruling to testify against slavery. Equiano discovers this case and decides that legal and religious

discourses would aid his abolitionist rhetoric.

In Equiano's abolitionist message, he utilizes Christian rhetoric to showcase his dejection and Christian conversion for British society, but emphasizes that slavery is inhumane, especially in God's eyes. He calls on British legislators to remember their God and have mercy on their poor people (233) or enslaved Africans. First, I will focus on Equiano's baptism, moments of despair, and participation in Christian community. Equiano is taught by Miss Guerins how to read and understand "the knowledge of God" to practice good conduct (79). Equiano realizes that he must be baptized to go to Heaven. To alleviate Equiano's anxiety, he is baptized at "St. Margaret's church, Westminster, in February 1759" (78). Equiano illustrates a happy and brutal scene side by side. After Equiano's baptism, he witnesses Spanish and French soldiers' battle. The ocean blows up from explosions (83). Equiano immediately shifts his experiences of baptism to war, to contrast birth and death, innocence and experience, and good and evil in the world. In these moments, Equiano comments on the sufferings of war, but he, himself, is expected to be virtuous to enter Heaven.

Equiano realizes the power of sin and virtue through his conversion. In doing so, he draws attention to the distinctions between good and evil practices by Christians. In these instances, Equiano argues that Christians should free their slaves to lead a moral life. Since Equiano appeals to a Christian audience, he reveals problematic behavior in the church to rectify their actions. He comments that people do not regularly practice devotion, follow the Ten Commandments, or act "good in their morals" (178-179). However, Equiano meets a mediator, Sandy Jenkins or an "old sea-faring man" that preaches the gospel and "the love of Christ" (Equiano 183). Through this experience of Christian fellowship with music, language, and prayer, he "admires the goodness of God" (184). On the other hand, Equiano recognizes that acting sinfully will prevent him from entering Heaven. A minister reminds Equiano that "no

unregenerate soul, or anything unclean, could enter the kingdom of Heaven” (188). After registering these words, Equiano realizes that “if [he] sinned again...[he] should certainly go to hell” (188). Equiano and other Christians must act benevolently to enter Heaven. Benevolence is a case against crimes. When Equiano is “willing to be saved by Jesus Christ,” he finds comfort, spirit, truth, and revelation in the Bible (190). After Equiano’s saving, he joins Mr. G. Smith’s church-fellowship and defines the benefits of Christianity in his life. In these moments, Equiano and other Christians should reflect on their actions, and allow themselves to be saved by Jesus Christ. Slavery cannot exist if Christians hope to enter heaven. Carretta argues that Equiano promoted his *Interesting Narrative* as a spiritual autobiography to appeal to Christian audiences, but also to question their motives for enslaving people. Building on Carretta’s argument, Sinanan demonstrates that Equiano’s *Narrative* explored the belief that a “slave’s soul could be saved”(65). According to Equiano, a slave could enter Heaven, so they practiced virtues, like other Christians. Equiano’s understanding of Christianity and the Bible led him to question his oppressors in the name of Jesus Christ.

Equiano uses the Bible as a powerful weapon against the slave trade. When he attempts to appease a *woolwow* Indian riot, after the Governor struck a friendly chief, Equiano refers to a Bible passage to control the people. He speaks, “I menaced him and the rest: I told them God lived there [in the heavens], and that he was angry with them, and they must not quarrel so...and if they did not leave off, and go away quietly, I would take the book (pointing to the bible), read, and *tell* God to make them dead. This was something like magic. The clamor immediately ceased...” (Equiano 208). Equiano diffuses the fight and misunderstanding between the *woolwow* Indians, the Governor, and Equiano’s neighbors. The Bible “contains the two attributes necessary for conversation—namely, the ability to listen and speak” (Molesworth 125). Equiano addresses British legislators or Britons first, and the oppressed Africans second in

receiving God's grace. He proclaims "May Heaven make the British senators the dispersers of light, liberty and science...then will be glory to God on the highest, on earth peace, and good-will to men" (Equiano 233). After he addresses the Britons and nations, he asks them to honor God. He honors the Bible by voicing, "It is righteousness exalteth a nation; but sin is a reproach to any people: destruction shall be to the workers of iniquity, and the wicked shall fall by their own wickedness" (Equiano 233). Again, Equiano uses his position as "Gustavus Vassa" or Briton to communicate with British senators and Britains who adopt a Christian identity, and who live in a Christian nation that God requires them to be "disperses of light, liberty and science" to bring peace and good-will to men by protecting God's people, including the Africans. Secondly, Equiano recognizes that sin will destroy any people, including the wicked that hold people in slavery. To aggrandize this point, Equiano ties the "cases of the oppressed [Africans]" by emphasizing the cruelty of the slaveholders (233). He points out torture devices, murder, and barbarity executed by slaveholders during the slave trade, in which God observes and recognizes as inhumane and unjust. Throughout Equiano's economic and religious discourses, he asks British Christians to remember God and "have mercy" on the oppressed Africans because they too are God's people and can provide useful employment and resources to the economy. In these discourses, Equiano is a mediator between Great Britain and Africa, and by utilizing his mobility, he strongly encourages the reader to practice benevolence at the "hand of God" (236) by becoming "better and wiser" (236) citizens, humans, and children of God. The Atlantic slave trade serves as a moral and religious lesson in which God's people must abolish wickedness and cruelty against each other. Equiano assimilates into British society and adopts good behavior. This good behavior reflects middle-class values; however, Equiano returns to his African identity (Bozeman 68). His autobiography resonates with the community of the African diaspora. Nostalgia or the memory of place reflects Equiano's longing for his mythic African

home. His words resonate with the oppressed, who attempt to reclaim “a measure of self-possession” through songs and community (Mallipeddi 238). In the community of the African diaspora, their nostalgia for “an original place” (Mallipeddi 247) is evident in other Black Atlantic writings like Equiano’s *Narrative*. The culture and history of the village Essaka is a preservation of the collective black experience.

Whereas Equiano’s rhetoric appeals to higher powers—both institutional and divine—for support, Douglass’s rhetoric develops a defiant and resistant discourse in his public and private spheres of addressing slavery. Gibson argues that Douglass develops a strong quality of work against the institution of slavery, in which he explores psychological resistance and religious intervention in his mode of escape from bondage. Also, Douglass utilizes other forms of resistance, such as song. In arguing against the perception that slaves sang most when they were happy, Douglass comments, “I did not, when a slave, understand the deep meaning of those rude and apparently incoherent songs” (11). However, Douglass discovers that slave songs are deeply meaningful to the enslaved people. In their melancholy, they testified against slavery, and prayed to God (Douglass 11-12). Slave songs were communicative discourses in which slaves adopted identities outside of the “literate” white society (Messmer 18). By participating in other types of discourses, Douglass shows that slaves’ songs are “a form of resistance rather than contentment” when they are depicted as a southern, tranquil soundscape in which masters and slaves live in harmony (Messmer 16). Although slave songs through sound production can be coerced by slave owners, slaves develop their own “critical and self-aware discourse” by communicating with each other outside of a written word/discourse (Messmer 15). Douglass recognizes that both writing and songs serve as representational discourses in which feelings/expressions are made within “the slave system that produces them” (Messmer 10). These songs resist the slave systems that produce them. Through other methods, Douglass resists his enslavement.

In Douglass's psychological resistance and religious intervention discourses, he focuses on the "breaking" and is made into a new man. Douglass compares Covey to a "larger than life" figure that "brings Douglass back from the dead and [propels] him into Heaven" (Gibson 558). In Douglass's rejection of authority, he discovers his manhood when "Mr. Covey seemed now to think he had me and could do what he pleased; but at this moment—from whence came the spirit I don't know—I resolved to fight. My resistance was so entirely unexpected that Covey seemed taken all aback" (62). Up until this moment, Mr. Covey severely whips Douglass every week, and makes Douglass believe that he is always watching him (74). However, in Edward Covey's "power to deceive," (75) Douglas describes Covey as a snake—a snake that "sometimes deceived himself" (76) into believing that he was a devout Christian. Covey and Douglass's religious faith is tested—through Covey's power and Douglass's despair. When Douglass is "carrying wheat to the fan," (79) his strength fails, and he experiences heat exhaustion. Douglass survives kicks and blows from Covey, heat exhaustion, and heavy blood loss. As a religious device, Douglass compares himself to a bloody Jesus Christ in which Douglass's "hair was all clotted with dust and blood...[and his] legs and feet were torn in sundry places with briers and thorns..." (81). Douglass discovers strength in a spiritual object—a root that will protect Douglass from Covey tying him up to whip him. Douglass carries the root and ultimately "seizes Covey hard by the throat" (84). Douglass chokes Covey but chooses not to kill him, and by Providence, Douglass is "spared the consequences of his radical insubordination" (Brewton 714). Douglass fights with Covey for two hours, and after this altercation, Douglass is never whipped again. Douglass emphasizes that "it was a glorious resurrection... [that] bold defiance took its place; and I now resolved that, however long I might remain a slave in form, the day had passed forever when I could be a slave in fact" (85). Douglass may be a "slave in form" but is no longer a "slave in fact" which alters his reality. Brewton argues that Douglass's struggle against Covey's

psychological manipulation and “breaking” of his African persona, develops a “bold defiance” (712) in which Douglass no longer fears death. Douglass is raised from the dead and restores himself as man with the power to reject a reality that only presents Douglass as a slave. Through Douglass’s powerful religious discourse, he rejects the institution of slavery and his slaveowner’s authority.

Another version of Douglass’s religious discourse merges with literacy. Douglass argues that God will deliver the Africans from the power of evil (70). In learning the Bible, Douglass recognizes that literacy is necessary to freedom. Douglass teaches his scholars how to read, learn, and strengthen their curiosity, in which they are deprived of as slaves. Douglass is secretive about “the opportunity to learn to read” (69) and reveals that he needed to keep St. Michael’s religious masters unaware of Douglass’s teaching methods. The students are taught God’s words. The religious masters wanted the slaves to “wrestl[e], box, and drink whisky” instead of “learning how to read the will of God” (Douglass 92) to keep them degraded in the institution of slavery. Douglass reveals how the institution of slavery operates—by keeping slaves uneducated and preoccupied with games, instead of intellectual learning and moral behavior. He asks questions about righteousness and deliverance, which Equiano addresses to his reader by quoting the Bible’s Proverbs. This is a powerful moment in Douglass’s psychological and spiritual journey, in which his spirit is strengthened in love of helping his fellow slaves become literate. Douglass is an organized leader to these people—he encourages determination and desire of manhood through a noble effort in resistance (75-76) in which they tackle their greatest fears. Even though Douglass’s group is betrayed, they still find strength by developing and attempting to carry out their runaway plan. Douglass’s discourses provide a secretive operation for other slaves to escape slavery.

Douglass does not put trust in slaveholders, nor does he become a mediator like Equiano.

After leaving Mr. Covey, Douglass lives with Mr. William Freeland, and rejects the proslavery argument of slavery through religion. He explains that religious slaveholders find any means to severely punish their slaves—even for mere faults. Douglass acknowledges the struggle for authority and lack of confidence in religious slaveholders as reasons for managing slaves and limiting their freedom so severely. These slaveholders feel their power threatened by resistant slaves. Douglass focuses on what should or should not be said to protect slaves, especially when they become runaways. Douglass expresses distrust of the government, and decides to secretly teach slaves how to read, while also helping them escape through the Underground Railroad. Although Douglass applauds noble declarations of escaping slavery, he believes that this action “enlighten[s] the master” (111). The master will have “greater watchfulness” and additional “power to capture his slave” (Douglass 111). Douglass provides an example in which he “remove[d] any suspicion” (115) of running away by strategizing a decoy—his relation to money and work. In a successful attempt, Douglass escapes in September 1838 to New York. When Douglass escapes to New York, he does not explain the directions he takes—nor provides any details about the Underground Railroad. On August 11th in Nantucket, Douglass spoke at an antislavery convention, in which he felt “a degree of freedom” (100) in exposing the institution of slavery. By observing other free colored people enjoying the comforts of employment and fine houses, Douglass still recognizes that fugitives are in danger of their masters finding them. He admits that, “I would keep the merciless slaveholder profoundly ignorant of the means of flight adopted by the slave” to protect their attempts at escape and the process itself, such as strategizing the use of tools, money, and print for the journey (87). In his rhetoric, he successfully chooses to be silent on escape, and loud on how the masters treat him, even though he includes few details on work and saving money. Through Douglass’s understanding of the master-slave relationship and religion, he resists enslavement.

On the other hand, Douglass describes the master-slave relationship regarding competition and domination in the Antebellum period. For plantations to work, slaveholders provided a reward system for “privileged” slaves, in which they were conferred titles such as “honorable” and “trustworthy” (12) and escaped the brutal field overseers. Slaveowners maintained authority over slaves through competition—slaves were expected to fight for the master’s praise, which Douglass compares to black freedmen working in offices for the political parties. To maintain domination over African Americans, political leaders controlled the political sphere by using African Americans as pawns for sympathy or privileging certain African Americans to maintain social order. Instead of acquiring actual human rights, African Americans were expected to feel gratitude for being offered an office position or a visit to the Great House Farm. However, Douglass draws out the violence enacted on Colonel Lloyd’s slaves which serves as a powerful image of violence within competition during slavery.

In Equiano’s and Douglass’s economic, literary, and religious discourses they advocate against the slave trade and attempt to free enslaved Africans. Equiano assimilates into British society, takes on a hybrid identity, and calls on the British government to continue their acts of benevolence in freeing the slaves from bondage. However, Equiano maintains his African identity and culture by returning to his imagined Essaka. He attempts to preserve African culture as a Black writer in the community of the African Diaspora. Douglass rejects Edward Covey as an authority figure, the systems of oppression, and slavery. He uses economic, literary, and religious discourses to reject oppression and violence. He recognizes that the Bible, religion, and literacy discourses can be used to combat the connection between them and the oppressors. Douglass published his autobiography over fifty years later, revealing the changes to the transatlantic slave trade and plantation slavery in the United States.

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