

Sandy's Root, Douglass's *Métis*: "Black Art" and the Craft of Resistance in the Slave Narratives of Frederick Douglass

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The political environment in which Frederick Douglass wrote his first two autobiographies—*Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, an American Slave* (1845) and *My Bondage and My Freedom* (1855)—determined more than just the contents of those texts.¹ Because white audiences (apart from select abolitionists) were hesitant to accept Black testimony about slavery, writers like Douglass had to consider how their readership received their stories, which is to say that endemic racial ideologies influenced authors' rhetorical strategies. Christopher S. Lewis has shown that these authors needed to consider *how* and *as whom* they might speak because of the limits of their "mostly white audiences' imaginations," and that they often secured publication by adopting or conforming to white-defined norms when telling their stories.² However, by 1855, Douglass had not only become a more reflective and analytical thinker but also more politically assertive and radical. After rejecting Garrisonian moral suasion, David Blight explains, Douglass began writing his second narrative as "an epic argument with his country," a characterization of *My Bondage* that helps explain its more stylistic and insistent language.³ Scholars have praised the revised autobiography's hyperbolic and parodic dimensions, even suggesting that its expanded sections are full of verbal play that constitutes a type of "freedom" in language.⁴

This praise suggests *My Bondage* might offer readers a more insightful—and, this essay maintains, a more radical—encounter with the aesthetics of Douglass's evolving political principles. Among other

differences, Douglass's account of his victory over Edward Covey is significantly longer and more detailed in *My Bondage*. Accordingly, this essay turns to Douglass's descriptions of the events preceding and surrounding the Covey episode, especially the text's evocations of Yorùbá folk knowledge, to uncover *mêtis* as an experimental rhetorical appeal that troubles the logic of chattel slavery and the legitimacy of racial subjugation. By granting conjure and rootwork validity in his narratives, Douglass's testimonies produce a sensibility of confusion that presents a challenge to antebellum racial ideology and its adherents, in particular those who believed African religious practices to be aberrant. I maintain that, through this transgressive disorientation, both narratives, but especially *My Bondage*, query the racial discourse that the institutionalization of slavery had naturalized.

The Covey episode begins when Douglass runs away from the plantation after being beaten. Hiding in a nearby forest, Douglass deliberates the only two options he believes are available, as he writes in the *Narrative*, "to go home and be whipped to death, or stay in the woods and be starved to death" (49). He records having then met with Sandy Jenkins, an enslaved African from a neighboring plantation who presents a new option: "He told me, with great solemnity, I must go back to Covey; but that before I went, I must go with him into another part of the woods, where there was a certain *root*, which, if I would take some of it with me, carrying it *always on my right side*, would render it impossible for Mr. Covey, or any other white man, to whip me" (49). To Sandy, who is familiar with African cosmologies and the folk knowledge of the Yorùbá people, a Niger-Congo ethnic group of southwestern and north-central Nigeria, this root transfers physical power to its carrier, imbuing that person with supernatural protection.⁵ Douglass seems to put little faith in the totem, but he pockets it before returning to Covey's plantation. When he receives no beating, he begins to question the power of the root, although Covey attacks the following morning, testing its power. Douglass recalls fighting back with an almost mythic strength—perhaps hinting at the root's efficacy—and trouncing Covey.

My intention in returning to this episode is not to suggest that Sandy and his root have gone unstudied, as several scholars have written on them in recent years. Zachary McLeod Hutchins has interpreted the supernatural object as a symbol of Christ, a reading that transforms Douglass's confrontation with Covey into a commentary on Paul's Letter to Philemon, the most well-known account of slavery in the New Testament.⁶ Hutchins cites Douglass's dismissal of Sandy's root (a denunciation

of Christ) as evidence of the author's budding atheism. Similarly, Jared Hickman has focused on Douglass's description of the fight in *My Bondage* to argue that the "bravura performance of Romantic titanism . . . underscores the extent to which Douglass abandoned the Christian millenarianism of the Garrisonian camp not for a tacitly secularist *political* abolitionism but rather for what we might call a heretical *political-theological* abolitionism."⁷ Readings like these have provided valuable insight into the Covey episode and helped to characterize Douglass as "a thinker at once less predictable and ideologically consistent and more intellectually restive and bold," as Richard Yarborough advises.⁸ However, because they rely on Christian theology as an interpretive lens, they also insist on fitting Sandy, his root, and the possibility of their legitimacy into a framework that is unable to accommodate them.

Instead of relying on references to Christian theological concepts, this essay examines how Douglass represents Sandy and his root as vestiges of African cosmological systems.⁹ I turn to the narratives' representations of Sandy and the cosmologies he embodies because representations of African religions have their own cultural politics. In her historical analysis of Obeah, a system of spiritual and healing practices developed in the Caribbean, Diana Paton shows how political imperatives drove discussions about African-derived religious beliefs and practices. As she explains, the ideas communicated by terms like Obeah were historically indeterminant and multiple because colonial, nationalist, and popular constructions of those terms often contradicted one another.¹⁰ Although discussions about diasporic religions helped to produce and stabilize their meaning over time, the ritual practices of those belief systems remained conceptually nebulous—or even illegible—to outsiders.

This essay shows how the narratives' descriptions of Sandy and his root play on the illegibility of African cosmologies, and how doing so might have implanted uncertainty in the minds of white readers. At first glance, the narratives' representations of rootwork and conjure seem to accommodate antebellum whites' preconceptions about those practices, as they appear to characterize Sandy's advice as witchcraft, magic, and superstition instead of describing it as a legitimate option for resisting Covey. While it is tempting to read such characterizations as Douglass's dismissal of African religious practices, Lewis reminds us that these complicated representations function as "critical re-draftings of conjure and root-working in US culture," and that conforming to white-defined norms was "a means of subversively communicating

and documenting information about relatively effective African diasporic religious resistance among enslaved people, albeit by framing this mode of resistance as unserious superstition.”¹¹ In that spirit, I argue that Douglass’s descriptions perform objectivity and neutrality to cleverly introduce antebellum whites to African cosmologies while minimizing those readers’ resistance to unfamiliar, non-Western systems of thought.

My aim is not to suggest that Douglass comes to embody Sandy’s Africanness, but rather to show that the narratives’ representations of Sandy in general—and the mysterious and possibly supernatural root in particular—reappropriate the postures and ideals of white readers. I argue that doing so opens a critical space in which the very idea of otherness threatens to disrupt the rationalism that legitimated chattel slavery. This is to say that Douglass appeals to *mêtis* to trouble the more familiar and objective logic of Western rationalism. Marcel Detienne and Jean-Pierre Vernant depict *mêtis* as a mode of artifice especially useful in the face of “forces too powerful to be controlled directly but which can be exploited despite themselves without ever being confronted head on,” and Karen Kopelson describes it as a “rhetoric that feigns one purpose in the pursuit of an eventual and seemingly opposed goal.”¹² *Mêtis* is a tactic of cunning deception grounded in appeals to practical knowledge and craftiness that, in Douglass’s hands, becomes a mode of resistance that can provoke suspicion about totalizing forms of Western knowledge. Enlivening *mêtis* as a rhetorical appeal lets the narratives query the discourses through which Western consciousness had constructed the idea of enslavement, and, in doing so, it challenges readers to reconsider and reconceptualize the enslaved.

I do not intend to suggest that Sandy’s rootwork is responsible for Douglass’s victory over Covey, or that he aimed to convince his audience that the root was responsible for his triumph. Rather, my argument follows Paul Gilroy’s claim that the Covey episode’s “carefully deployed ambiguity may . . . be a cryptic acknowledgement of the different ways in which black and white readers were likely to respond to the tale” by suggesting, further, that this same polysemy may also act as a subtle and savvy strategy for prompting antebellum whites to critique their own racist ideas.¹³ As we will see, even the smallest insinuation that the root can affect the realities of Douglass’s situation in the American South constitutes a daring political affront to the expectations of white readers and the belief systems to which they were accustomed, those steeped in Enlightenment philosophy and Christian theology

(and unfamiliar with African cosmologies).¹⁴ A sustained analysis of Douglass's account of Sandy, his root, and the conceptual disorientation they produce is needed because the narratives prefigure the Black radical tradition that scholars have identified as an essential feature of African American literary and cultural production. Understanding Douglass's political-rhetorical agitation—his appeal to *métis* and the critical Blackness it produces—is necessary for comprehending fully the emergence of such aesthetic resistance.

I. Illegible Cosmologies and the Roots of Black Radicalism

Scholars studying the cultural transformations of the African diaspora have shown that, even though Europeans may have believed that the slave trade shipped deculturated Africans across the Atlantic, the Middle Passage transported a number of thought systems that fell outside the Eurocentric rubric of civilization, including African cosmologies. Cedric J. Robinson explains that the Eurocentric mind-set worked to erase such vestiges of Africanity, but that it was unable to recognize most and was, as a result, unable to root them out.¹⁵ Enslavers struggled to understand and eradicate belief systems and folk practices of (or emerging out of) the African diaspora, such as the Jamaican Obeah, the Haitian Vodou, the Jamaican Myalism, or the Trinidadian Shango, to name a few.¹⁶ Often, these African-derived traditions were legible only when thought of as witchcraft, magic, or superstition and were thus sources of great confusion for those native to or integrated into Western thought.¹⁷

Historical examples of white confusion and misprision confirm that many enslavers struggled to understand the significance of folk practices like rootwork and conjure. For example, in his 1842 *The Religious Instruction of the Negroes in the United States*, Charles Colcock Jones tries to make sense of diasporic religious beliefs through the lens of Christianity, ultimately misrepresenting them as impious superstition and witchcraft: "Intimately connected with their ignorance is their *superstition*. They believe in second sight, charms, witchcraft, and a kind of irresistible Satanic influence. The superstitions brought from Africa have not been wholly laid aside."¹⁸ Writing for *De Bow's Review of the Southern and Western States* in 1851, S. A. Cartwright likewise reveals his cultural preconceptions when he dismisses conjuration as an irrational system of belief. "It may be thought that the old superstition about conjuration has passed away with the old stock of native Africans," Cartwright states, repeating Jones's ideas about ignorance,

“but it is too deeply radicated [*sic*] in the negro intellect to pass away; intelligent negroes believe in it, who are ashamed to acknowledge it.”¹⁹ Later still, in 1870, Thaddeus Norris contrasts folk practices with white (Christian) beliefs by characterizing the religious practices of the enslaved as repugnant and foolish: “the more refined a people, the more interesting its mythical legends. Those of the Caucasian race are attractive; while those of the negroes are repulsive, especially when connected with their heathenish religions.”²⁰ David H. Brown summarizes such historical accounts by arguing that “conjure and conjurers were, more often than not, regarded as evil instruments of the Devil by white society.”²¹ Indeed, accounts by Jones, Cartwright, and Norris suggest that although African-derived religions were in antebellum whites’ line of sight, they were perceived as little more than superstition, witchcraft, or apocryphal barbarism.²²

Even though whites misunderstood and dismissed ancestor worship, burial rites, the use of objects as charms, and other stylized ritual performances coming from African cosmological systems, such folk practices remained central to the experiences of the enslaved. Sterling Stuckey explains that syncretic religious practices like the ring shout were often performed secretly, away from the white gaze, to fulfill enslaved Africans’ emotional and spiritual needs, as well as to interpret New World experiences.²³ Despite differences in language or ceremonial specifics, Albert J. Raboteau emphasizes, such religious customs had a unifying effect, as ethnically disparate Africans came to recognize “a common and basic African theological perspective” that joined them in a shared cultural heritage.²⁴

If fidelity to African religious traditions and divergence from them is characteristic of diasporic experience, then we must consider the narratives’ nuanced representations of Africa and its cosmologies even if Douglass did not tend to believe African Americans had strong racial, national, or spiritual connections with African peoples.²⁵ In both narratives, Douglass calls on the idea of Africa in the conjurer figure of Sandy Jenkins. The ritual practices that inform Sandy’s protective root have origins in Yorùbá mythology, in which the messenger of the gods, Eleggua/Eshu, taught Africans how to use herbs—especially roots—as practical totems to protect themselves from dangerous animals and diseases, to heal injuries, and to assure success when hunting.²⁶ As the one who advises Douglass to carry a protective root, Sandy comes to embody the Eleggua/Eshu archetype, which Clyde W. Ford describes as “the transformer of old patterns that cause us to be stuck,” and as a

guide who “break[s] up old unproductive ways of being in deed or in thought.”²⁷ With his practical knowledge of African rootwork, Sandy summons protective spirits to create the conditions from which new patterns of thinking emerge, from which new modes of resistance and freedom become possible.²⁸

Sandy's representation as a conjurer is significant because vestiges of African thought systems, such as the Yorùbá notion of Eleggua/Eshu and the rootwork it inspired, are the seeds of Black radicalism. Robinson defines this culture of opposition as a “specifically African response to [the] oppression emergent from the immediate determinants of European development in the modern era and framed by orders of human exploitation woven into the interstices of European social life from the inception of Western civilization.”²⁹ Rather than think of Blackness as an epidermal phenomenon that precedes European irruption into Africa, scholars following Robinson posit Blackness as an expression of one's orientation toward the mechanisms of social stratification that ascribe a sense of racial Blackness to bodies with Black skin. Building on this conceptualization, Fred Moten and Paul C. Taylor, among others, have argued that Blackness should not be thought of as merely a biological, national, or diasporic identity, nor as something measurable in terms of authenticity, but as a disposition that refuses to acknowledge tenets of power and that, further, is predisposed to antagonize such structures in ways that upset their part in the preservation of social order.³⁰

Robinson argues that the antagonistic attitude of critical Blackness emerged apace with the ending of slavery; however, Douglass's re-drafting of African religious practices and his conjuring of Eleggua/Eshu suggest that the ideological roots of Black radicalism may have preceded the formation of the intelligentsia on which Robinson's *Black Marxism* focuses.³¹ As we will see, the way Douglass plays up the cosmological illegibility of Yorùbá folk knowledge might have confused the narratives' antebellum white readership, thus challenging the putative stability and universality of Western rationalism and querying the ideologies that instantiated slavery and anti-Black racism.

II. Objectivity and Ambiguity in the Covey Incident

As an embodiment of the Eleggua/Eshu archetype, Sandy and his root would have been largely unrecognizable to those unaccustomed to African cosmologies and the diasporic religious practices they inspired. Instead of reconciling Yorùbá folk knowledge with more familiar

Christian and Enlightenment frameworks, however, Douglass relies on this unfamiliarity and alterity, especially in *My Bondage*. There, Douglass postures an objective viewpoint by representing Sandy as “a genuine African,” yet he goes on to dramatize the folk connotations that this characterization raises. He writes that Sandy “was not only a religious man, but he professed to believe in a system for which I have no name,” then further mystifies his spirituality by stating that Sandy had “inherited some of the so called magical powers, said to be possessed by African and eastern nations” (191). By referring to African cosmological systems as “so called magical powers,” and by suggesting that Sandy might be “possessed” by those beliefs, Douglass postures the doubt and suspicion familiar to antebellum whites.

Significantly, even though Douglass expresses reservations about the root’s superstitious qualities, he does not permit readers to dismiss Sandy based on the inarticulable mysticism these descriptions raise. Reappropriating a convention common to slave narratives, Douglass offers a preliminary characterization of Sandy that testifies to the sincerity of his character and the integrity of his beliefs. Similar to the way that William Lloyd Garrison and Wendell Phillips authenticate Douglass’s honest temperament in the preface to the *Narrative*, Douglass disarms dismissive readers by reporting that Sandy is well known in the region for “his good sense” (190).³² With this remark, Douglass adopts the subject position of white authority, no matter how he might have been read. The narratives’ objective and neutral tone helps the author achieve the authority he would be denied otherwise.

By withholding specifics about Sandy’s belief system, however, Douglass also advances a curious ambiguity: readers are primed to accept Douglass’s testimony, but he allows them to know Sandy as little more than one who subscribes to a doctrine outside Western sensibilities of perception and to recognize the root as an extension of that cosmological illegibility. The ambiguity of Douglass’s craft is exemplified in the multiple meanings of “good sense,” which could refer to the sensible and practical approach Sandy takes to navigate enslavement, the acuteness of his faculties for perceiving and interpreting external stimuli, or—more likely—a broader notion of African folk wisdom that Douglass does not articulate but refuses to deny.

Douglass accentuates the conceptual turbulence produced by Sandy’s cosmological illegibility as *My Bondage* begins to hint at the power of his Yorùbá folk knowledge. To convince Douglass to accept his advice, Sandy had contrasted his root against Douglass’s “book learn-

ing,” the lessons he adopted from his US education as an enslaved African who could both read and write (192). The binary relationship *My Bondage* establishes between Douglass's book learning and Sandy's nameless system puts added emphasis on the inaccessibility of African folk knowledge, as neither of the narratives explains the rootwork lessons of Eleggua/Eshu. More radically, this binary also indicates that the folk knowledge may be a functional weapon against the plantation logic that threatens to subjugate the enslaved, as it suggests *both* routes are viable modes of resistance, although the latter may be a more successful option. *My Bondage* hints at folk knowledge's potential when Douglass remarks twice that Sandy had recalibrated his understanding of his own situation. He first comments on the effects of folk knowledge when he states, “with all my learning . . . Sandy was more than a match for me,” and then clarifies that he felt the power of Sandy's cosmological system when he admits, “a slight gleam or shadow of [Sandy's] superstition had fallen upon me” (192). While subtle, the possibility that Sandy's folk system may have empowered Douglass is a small but noteworthy validation of its alleged efficacy, an important recognition of the potentiality of some illegible authority beyond the scope of the common Western perspective. Although these remarks seem to rationalize Douglass's decision to pocket Sandy's root, they simultaneously testify to the potential of Eleggua/Eshu to disrupt the ideological order of enslavement.

The language describing Douglass's fight with Covey preserves the possibility of the root's power and intensifies the conceptual instability of the narratives. Although Douglass does not discuss the root's power directly, it remains in his pocket during the fight and seems to lend him an advantage. Characterizing himself as a sort of personified extension of Sandy's Yorùbá folk knowledge, or even as the root itself, Douglass recounts how he asserted himself physically, an act from which he achieves an authoritative voice in and as the author of the narratives. In *My Bondage*, he recounts announcing his resistance: “I told him ‘*I did mean to resist, come what might;*’ that I had been by him treated like a *brute*, during the last six months; and that I should stand it *no longer*” (195). The unexplained origin of Douglass's newfound strength (amplified by the italics) remains ambiguous but might be read as the equivalent of rootworking itself, as Douglass represents the fight in a way that fulfils the advice Sandy had given him. Sandy had promised that Covey would be unable to whip him, and during the fight Covey is disempowered, which Douglass expresses by highlighting his verbal impotency.

Covey was initially able to command every enslaved person on his plantation, but Douglass crafts an unexplained situation in which neither Bill Smith (a hired hand) nor Caroline (Covey's only enslaved female) respond to their enslaver's demands of assistance. For a curious and unexplained moment, the master-slave dialectic inverts; Covey's language fails to have any meaningful effect, even as Douglass's speech acts seem to create the conditions of freedom he seeks to achieve in the physical altercation.

In his post-escape meditations regarding the fight with Covey, Douglass continues this performance of objectivity while offering cryptic assessments of Sandy's folk system and its influence. Like his account of the root itself, these meditations seem neutral but nevertheless allow the tenability of Yorùbá folk knowledge to linger in the text. Instead of attributing his triumph to brute strength, for example, Douglass admits confusion over his victory. In the *Narrative*, Douglass expresses this confusion with awe: "It was for a long time a matter of surprise to me why Mr. Covey did not immediately have me taken by the constable to the whipping-post, and there regularly whipped for the crime of raising my hand against a white man in defence of myself" (51). With a subtle nod to the possible power of the root, Douglass then admits, "the only explanation I can now think of does not entirely satisfy me" (51). Ten years after, in *My Bondage*, Douglass downplays this dissatisfaction, which still leaves the power of the root unconfirmed but undenied: "Whence came the daring spirit necessary to grapple with a man who, eight-and-forty hours before, could, with his slightest word have made me tremble like a leaf in a storm, I do not know" (194). In a subsequent passage, Douglass repeats that "the easy manner in which [he] got off, was, for a long time, a surprise to [him]," to which he adds that he "cannot, even now, fully explain the cause" (198). Here, the tone suggests Douglass is searching for a rational explanation that would align with readers' preconceptions about power and insurrection. Instead of explaining the fight's outcome according to straightforward notions of strength, however, these passages extend Sandy's cosmological illegibility to Douglass's battle with Covey as if to imply he was the root working against the slave-breaker, giving Yorùbá folk knowledge legitimacy.

Later, Douglass appeals to notions of capitalism and the importance of a slave-breaker's reputation to offer a more rational explanation; however, even in this rationalization, the cosmological illegibility conjured by his representation of Yorùbá folk knowledge haunts the logic of Douglass's reasoning:

The only explanation I can venture to suggest, is the fact, that Covey was, probably, ashamed to have it known and confessed that he had been mastered by a boy of sixteen. Mr. Covey enjoyed the unbounded and very valuable reputation, of being a first rate overseer and *negro breaker*. By means of this reputation, he was able to procure his hands for *very trifling* compensation, and with very great ease. His interest and his pride mutually suggested the wisdom of passing the matter by, in silence. The story that he had undertaken to whip a lad, and had been resisted, was, of itself, sufficient to damage him; for his bearing should, in the estimation of slaveholders, be of that imperial order that should make such an occurrence *impossible*. I judge from these circumstances, that Covey deemed it best to give me the go-by. (198–99)

Douglass notes that the racial logic of enslavement should have made his insurrection against Covey, a representative of white hegemony, impossible. Despite this impossibility, Sandy and his inarticulate system seem to permit Douglass's insurrection to occur, creating an unresolved contradiction in the text. The passage thus marks the limits of enslavement's logic by speaking to the irrationality of the incident. Indeed, although Douglass's rationalization is a reasonable explanation for the leeway Covey offers him after the fight, his hesitancy to accept it indicates that it is not the only valid interpretation. Beneath the apparently objective language, another possibility persists: equally important, unspoken in the passage but never denied in the text, may be the cosmologies symbolized in the root, which remains in Douglass's pocket.³³

It is not my intention to suggest that Douglass achieves his freedom *because* of Sandy's root.³⁴ Whether the author accepted Sandy's ideas is for the most part indiscernible, although many scholars have suggested that he did not.³⁵ However, as the coming section shows, it is of considerable importance that Douglass refuses to reject Sandy's system or his root outright; instead, he leans into the cosmological illegibility that they conjure to create a disruptive space that complicates the literary representations of enslavement and power. For this reason, instead of speculating about the cause of Douglass's victory, this essay seeks to reconsider how Eleggua/Eshu might serve as a representational counterpoint to the logic of slavery at the level of narrative. The literary presence of Sandy and his root in both the *Narrative* and *My Bondage*, as well as the way each of Douglass's autobiographies entertains the

possibility of their power and protective legitimacy despite their superstitious otherness, are distinguishing features of the narratives, ones that raise questions about the devices of racial legitimization in general and the institution of slavery in particular.

III. Douglass's *Mêtis*

Although Sandy's association with a distinctly African cosmological system is clear in his characterization as "a genuine African" who is familiar with the folk knowledges of that continent, Douglass's representations of rootwork and conjure raise questions about his own Western positionality. As we have seen, Douglass seems suspicious of Yorùbá folk knowledge even as he puzzles over the potential of Sandy's root. The instability of Douglass's liminality helps us see that the very binary of Western and non-Western is unproductive for charting the critical Blackness of Douglass's narratives. Indeed, Robinson, Moten, and Taylor each describe critical Blackness as an attitudinal response to the experiences of racial hierarchization, meaning it is a reaction to—and therefore born out of—the racial episteme associated with Western rationalism.

One of the biggest challenges of articulating the operation of critical Blackness is our limited vocabulary for differentiating between distinct types of knowledge and their production. Knowledge, in the West, is often perceived to be a totality. For this reason, an antagonistic mode of thought that troubles reason and polices the peripheries of what we think we know about race often feels incoherent and inarticulable. In order to conceptualize the critical Blackness Douglass produces with his validation of Sandy and his root—or in order to locate the relation of critical Blackness to the dominant racial ideologies it critiques—we must create space for a mode of knowledge production at odds with the modern *episteme*, the set of codified and repeatable rules that are presumed to be universal within a community like the West, the set of discourses that Michel Foucault associated with "the conditions of possibility of all knowledge, whether expressed in a theory or silently invested in a practice."³⁶

One alternative is *mêtis*. According to Detienne and Vernant, *mêtis* encompasses all "forms of wiley [*sic*] intelligence, of effective, adaptable cunning" that work through the implementation of "resourceful ploys . . . and stratagems."³⁷ The Greek *mêtis* translates as "wisdom" and "wise counsel," but Kopelson explains that, as a distinctive *techne*, it is more broadly concerned with the production and effectiveness of opportunistic and resourceful knowledge, including cunning and

trickery.³⁸ This sense of *mêtis* is easy to connect to Douglass's performance of objectivity when telling of Sandy.³⁹ Whereas Sandy's Yorùbá folk knowledge is distinctly non-Western, *mêtis* has an established yet undertheorized relation to episteme, one more complex—and more appropriate for our purposes—than the relation of familiar racial discourse to the well-worn notions of Elegua/Eshu.

Not central to our conceptualization of knowledge, *mêtis* is most productively located at the fringe of the prevailing *forma mentis*, which is to say it continuously threatens the order of logical consciousness by questioning the legitimacy of established knowledge. Douglass articulates the relation of episteme to *mêtis* when juxtaposing his “book learning” and Sandy’s “good sense.” As Sandy tells Douglass, abstract rationalism of “book learning” is ineffectual against the discourse that legitimates his enslavement because it is part and parcel of the same ordered and hierarchized rationalism that naturalizes chattel slavery. Whereas Douglass had grown to believe that the master-slave dialogues of *The Columbian Orator* might be used to disarticulate the culture of slavery, Sandy points out that they “had not kept Covey off [him]” (192). Sandy’s simple retort encapsulates how language carries the values of its culture with it, how Douglass’s literacy with the logic of slavery would have little effect in dismantling that system of power.

As an alternative to “book learning,” or the rationalized presumptions of the racial episteme, Sandy offers his “good sense,” an embodied knowledge that unfolds as a critical response to the realities Douglass faces on Covey’s plantation. Sandy’s “good sense” is a reaction to racialization and enslavement, which is to say sense-making, as energized by roots, is born of the racial episteme for the purpose of “making sense” that queries the culture of slavery. Perhaps for this reason, in *My Bondage* Douglass refers to the heretical power of Sandy’s root as a “black art” (193), deftly characterizing it as an aesthetic response to the ideologies that racialized and subjugated Africans. The tension between “book learning” and “good sense” captures the dialectic relationship of *mêtis* to episteme, how the former functions as a reduction of a mode of sense production that performs an obscure and enigmatic role in the formation and maintenance of rational thought: as an embodied mode of meaning making, “good sense” actively disrupts the authority of episteme by sounding the friction (and general slipperiness) discerned between the “known” and the unknowable, unidentifiable, incoherent, and illegible so as to raise questions that challenge the logics of extant discourse.⁴⁰

The conceptual instability of the Covey section similarly acts to delegitimize or negate the epistemic underpinnings of chattel bondage. Indeed, Douglass critiques rational thought itself by producing narrative ambiguity that undercuts the stability and universality of the period's racial episteme, and thus recreates for readers the sensory confusion he recounts having felt when Sandy's "good sense" overcame him. For this reason, the battle with Covey is not only an autobiographical account of the struggle in which Douglass gains a type of literal freedom from the cruel slave-breaker; it is also an allegory for the threat that critical Blackness poses to the established ideologies of the racial episteme. If we are attentive to the conceptual disorientations produced by Douglass's *mêtis*, we can see how the Covey episode captures—and even makes readers sense—the enduring tension between Western rationalism and critical Blackness's deconstructive sensibility.

It is significant that Douglass dramatizes the effects of this narrative strategy. Sandy's characterization as a mercurial advisor hints at a new psychology, one that chronicles the emergence of the critical Blackness Robinson historicizes. By representing Sandy as a sort of wise counsel who shares new strategies of sense making for surviving the enslaved African's dark night in the woods—"I found Sandy an old adviser," he writes in each account (1997, 49; 2014, 191)—Douglass describes the encounter as one in which he discovers how to disorder and "sort out" the distribution of power on the plantation, as well as the sense of freedom that comes with besting Covey. As a catalyst for this new psychology, Sandy's figuration as a sense maker amounts to an expression of ontogeny, a coming into being of a mode of consciousness distinct from that with which Douglass had heretofore navigated enslavement. More than the writing of a character, Douglass's inception of Sandy unfolds as a generative myth for critical Blackness as an ontology.

Sandy's role as Douglass's wise counsel constitutes a threat to the racial episteme because of the nature of the advice he offers to resist Covey as its paradigmatic figure. As Douglass describes the advice in *My Bondage*, the strategy Sandy advises is not one of forceful insurrection, or even trickery, but the same sort of cosmological disruption the narratives conjure in their discussion of the root:

He told me that he could help me; that, in those very woods, there was an herb, which in the morning might be found, possessing all the powers required for my protection . . . and that, if I would take

his advice, he would procure me the root of the herb of which he spoke. He told me further, that if I would take that root and wear it on my right side, it would be impossible for Covey to strike me a blow; that with this root about my person, no white man could whip me. (191)

Against the ideological power of the racial episteme, which has professed the knowledges that determine Douglass's condition, Sandy proffers a code of conduct through which the enslaved might vitiate the logical authority of Covey and, by extension, the "white man." Instead of advising Douglass to exercise brute strength (*bie*), as one accustomed to the power dynamic of mastery and slavery might expect, Sandy counsels him in methods through which he might delegitimize and negate the conceptual figuration of the slave-breaker (*mêtis*).⁴¹ With the help of Sandy's illegible cosmological system, symbolized in the root, the narratives deconstruct this figure by representing the irrational as actual, as Douglass later explains that the result of the brawl is that he is never again whipped, never again subject to the rationalism of chattel slavery (1997, 51; 2014, 198).

Douglass describes Sandy's thought system ambiguously in both narratives, but it is through the illegibility of these representations that he enacts *mêtis*, provokes confusion, and shares his perspective about the illogic of slavery. As Jay Dolmage explains, "those with *mêtis* can see the world slightly differently, can find opportunity to turn the tables on those with greater *bie*," such as Covey; it is for this reason that "the form of intelligence that Metis is to represent . . . was seen as dangerous, as Other, and as eminently powerful."⁴² Like Moten's depiction of critical Blackness as "the disruption of already given normative, regulative notions of totality," Douglass's deployment of *mêtis* is most recognizable by its troubling effects, the way it can temporarily interrupt and suspend the logic of the period's racial episteme, as it does when the enslaved violate the norms of mastery and subjugation by defeating (and whipping) the enslaver.⁴³ As a narrative strategy for producing critical Blackness, *mêtis* is always threatening because of its definitional propensity to disarticulate that which we think we know.

IV. The Craft of Resistance

Houston A. Baker Jr. has argued that the enslaved "had to seek means of survival and fulfillment on that middle ground where the European slave trade had deposited [them]," that they "had to seize whatever weapons

came to hand in [their] struggle for self definition.”⁴⁴ Aesthetic responses like Douglass’s are significant—if often overlooked—strategies for disarticulating stereotypical figurations of the enslaved and crafting a mode of self-definition. As an aesthetic strategy for inciting conceptual disorientation, Douglass’s appeal to *mêtis* is a subtler weapon for challenging the authority of whiteness than the modes of resistance he describes in the narratives—outright physical aggression, theft, and flight, for instance. Along these lines, Michel de Certeau has characterized *mêtis* as a “practical intelligence,” the basis for the development of strategies through which the vulnerable or subjugated can safely navigate and disrupt oppressive institutions and power structures, or, at the very least, tactics with which one might survive and make do.⁴⁵

The narratives’ *mêtis*—Douglass’s use of illegible African cosmologies to create conceptual instability—is a strategy of aesthetic resistance because it can implant uncertainty in the minds of antebellum white readers and because it creates the conditions from which confusion and critical inquiry threaten historically entrenched racial assumptions. The mysticism connoted by the idea of Sandy’s root serves to reverse the normal identity-making processes through which the racial episteme exercises its logic and reason, which is to say the uncertainties Douglass implants function to describe the racial identities that the institution of slavery had *inscribed* on the bodies of enslaved Africans. He first assumes the identity of an enslaved person by adopting the mode of being the West forces upon him: this is “how a man was made a slave” (1997, 47). However, the narratives incorporate the root at precisely the moment Douglass dismisses this ascribed identity—the moment that he unwrites the identity of the enslaved—and recognizes a more complex ontology with a new orientation to freedom and fugitivity. The development of a critical Black ontology, he emphasizes, is “how a slave was made a man” (1997, 47).⁴⁶ Race finds its articulation in a system of visual logic of pigmentation, but the critical Blackness generated in the narratives’ representations of Sandy and his root disrupts the rationality of this epidermal discourse and calls into question the politics on which Western racialization depends.

As both testimonials *and* disarticulations of chattel slavery’s logic, the narratives appear to relate the horrors of enslavement while they also implant ideological uncertainty. Douglass’s *mêtis* thus challenges rhetorical norms used in arguments against slavery, meaning the narratives can affect ideological change in excess of the conventional slave narrative.⁴⁷ This interpretation advances Valerie Smith’s suggestion

that Douglass is “simultaneously complicit with and critical of the ideology of those who dominate them,” that “by uncovering . . . systemic contradictions Douglass seems to call for a radical cultural transformation.”⁴⁸ While Baker has argued that Douglass is unable to imagine himself apart from the identity his superordinate ascribes to him, and although Annette Nientzow maintains that the act of recording his story as an autobiography is evidence of his subjugation to the values of the dominant culture, Douglass's *métis* marks his autobiographies as articles steeped in critical Blackness.⁴⁹

The artfulness of Douglass's craft presents the reader with an opportunity to consider how Black radicalism appeared in the antebellum period, the era preceding the age out of which Robinson and others have traced its origins and development. Douglass's treatment of Sandy Jenkins and his root, as well as the illegibility they conjure, reveals his participation in a radical aesthetic tradition at the heart of Black expressive practices. We might carry Sandy's root with us by tracing this attitude further into the past and delineating its evolution from subtle gestures of antagonism to more overt methods of insurrection, and by further mapping the social philosophy of being stateless and subjugated in the psychological landscape of Western thought.

Notes

1. Unless noted otherwise, this essay references Frederick Douglass, *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, An American Slave*, ed. William L. Andrews and William S. McFeely (New York: Norton, 1997); and Frederick Douglass, *My Bondage and My Freedom*, ed. David W. Blight (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2014). Both are cited parenthetically in the text.

2. Christopher S. Lewis, “Conjure Women, Root Men, and Normative Visions of Freedom in Antebellum Slave Narratives,” *Arizona Quarterly* 74, no. 2 (2018): 128.

3. David Blight, *Frederick Douglass: Prophet of Freedom* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2018), 253.

4. William L. Andrews, *To Tell a Free Story: The First Century of Afro-American Autobiography, 1760–1865* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1988), 288; David Leverenz, *Manhood and the American Renaissance* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1989), 109; and Peter A. Dorsey, “Becoming the Other: The Mimesis of Metaphor in Douglass's *My Bondage and My Freedom*,” *PMLA* 111, no. 3 (1996), 435.

5. See Katrina Hazzard-Donald, *Mojo Workin': The Old African American Hoodoo System* (Champaign: University of Illinois Press, 2012), 22–24.

6. See Zachary McLeod Hutchins, “Rejecting the Root: The Liberating, Anti-Christ Theology of Douglass's *Narrative*,” *Nineteenth-Century Literature* 68, no. 3 (2013): 292–322.

7. Jared Hickman, “Douglass Unbound,” *Nineteenth-Century Literature* 68, no. 3 (2013): 328.

8. Richard Yarborough, “Frederick Douglass and Theology,” *Nineteenth-Century Literature* 68, no. 3 (2013): 290.

9. Poet Kevin Young briefly considers the root's relation to Africanity in the *Narrative*: “That there's no harm, if no good, in the *root*, which is italicized in the original—seems to speak to the ambiguity of the fetish if not its power. The *root* serves to empower Douglass: its mere possession allows him to no longer be a possession.” He notes that “the *root* is suggestive of another tongue and another world, untranslatable,” and further emphasizes that it “embodies

the secrecy and invulnerability of . . . black folk culture," but his analysis does not exhaust the symbol's significance. See Kevin Young, *The Grey Album: On the Blackness of Blackness* (Minneapolis, MN: Graywolf Press, 2012), 38–40.

10. Diana Paton, *The Cultural Politics of Obeah: Religion, Colonialism and Modernity in the Caribbean World* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015), 1–9.

11. Lewis, "Conjure Women, Root Men, and Normative Visions of Freedom in Antebellum Slave Narratives," 127.

12. Marcel Detienne and Jean-Pierre Vernant, *Cunning Intelligence in Greek Culture and Society*, trans. Janet Lloyd (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1978), 47; and Karen Kopelson, "Rhetoric on the Edge of Cunning; Or, the Performance of Neutrality (Re)Considered as a Composition Pedagogy for Student Resistance," *College Composition and Communication* 55, no. 1 (2003): 130.

13. Paul Gilroy, *The Black Atlantic: Modernity and Double Consciousness* (New York: Verso, 1993), 62.

14. Other narratives tend to reject African cosmologies outright. For example, Henry Bibb visits a conjurer who advises him to chew on a bitter root and to carry a powder of alum and salt as protection from the whip. He dismisses this advice when it fails to protect him from being beaten. Through his disbelief he highlights a similarity between him and white readers, who regarded such beliefs as irrational by default. See Henry Bibb, *The Life and Adventures of Henry Bibb* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 2001), 25–32.

15. Cedric J. Robinson, *Black Marxism: The Making of the Black Radical Tradition* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2000), 76; see also Barbara J. Ballard, "Frederick Douglass and the Ideology of Resistance," *Critical Review of International Social and Political Philosophy* 7, no. 4 (2004): 70.

16. For more on African-derived traditions and the development of syncretic religious practices, see Margarite Fernández Olmos and Lizabeth Paravisini-Gebert, *Sacred Possessions: Vodou, Santería, Obeah, and the Caribbean* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2003); Margarite Fernández Olmos and Lizabeth Paravisini-Gebert, *Creole Religions of the Caribbean: An Introduction from Vodou and Santería to Obeah and Espiritismo* (New York: New York University Press, 2003); Albert J. Raboteau, *Canaan Land: A Religious History of African Americans* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001); Albert J. Raboteau, *Slave Religion: The "Invisible Institution" in the Antebellum South* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004); and Yvonne P. Chireau, *Black Magic: Religion and the African American Conjuring Tradition* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2006); as well as primary sources compiled in Milton C. Sernett, *African American Religious History: A Documentary Witness* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1999).

17. See Michael Craton, *Sineus of Empire: A Short History of British Slavery* (Garden City, NY: Anchor Press, 1974), 218.

18. Charles Colcock Jones, *The Religious Instruction of the Negroes in the United States* (Savannah, GA: Thomas Purse, 1842), 127–28.

19. S. A. Cartwright, "How to Save the Republic, and the Position of the South in the Union," *De Bow's Review of the Southern and Western States* 11 (1851): 213.

20. Thaddeus Norris, "Negro Superstitions," *Lippincott's Monthly Magazine* 6 (1870): 90–91.

21. David H. Brown, "Conjure/Doctors: An Exploration of a Black Discourse in America, Antebellum to 1940," *Folklore Forum* 23, nos. 1/2 (1990): 10.

22. Such historical examples lead Jeffrey E. Anderson to suggest that "many whites learned of conjure from their slaves," but that "few observers commented on the practice beyond pointing it out as a sign of slaves' intellectual backwardness." He explains that African American folk beliefs and practices were rarely studied before the Civil War, after which they received serious treatment from Zora Neale Hurston, Harry Middleton Hyatt, and interviewers for the Works Progress Administration. But many researchers continued to represent diasporic religions as backward well into the twentieth century. For white folklorists, dismissing conjure reasserted the cultural supremacy of whiteness, whereas Black folklorists sometimes diminished it in the name of racial uplift. See Jeffrey E. Anderson, *Conjure in African American Society* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2008), 1–13; as well as Zora Neale Hurston, "Hoodoo in America," *Journal of American Folklore* 48, no. 174 (1931): 317–417; Zora Neale Hurston, *Mules and Men* (Philadelphia: J. B. Lippincott, 1935); Harry Middleton Hyatt, *Folklore from Adams County Illinois* (New York: Alma Egan Hyatt Foundation, 1935); and Harry Middleton Hyatt, *Hoodoo—Conjuration—Witchcraft—Rootwork: Beliefs Accepted by Many*

Negroes and White Persons, These Being Orally Recorded among Blacks and Whites (Hannibal, MO: Western, 1970).

23. Sterling Stuckey, *Slave Culture: Nationalist Theory and the Foundations of Black America* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1987), 24.

24. African theological perspectives endured even as slaves were introduced to—and began practicing—Christianity. Stuckey explains that Christianity often functioned as a performance that hid African beliefs and practices from white overseers: “Christianity provided a protective exterior beneath which more complex, less familiar (to outsiders) religious principles and practices were operative,” meaning that under the cover of Christianity, “vital aspects of Africanity, which some considered eccentric in movement, sound, and symbolism, could more easily be practiced openly.” Such insights raise questions about the sort of Christianity Douglass professes. See Raboteau, *Slave Religion*, 29; and Stuckey, *Slave Culture*, 38.

25. For more on Douglass's relationship to contemporary Africa and the almost mythic image he had developed of Egypt as an origin of culture and knowledge, see Daniel Kilbride, “What Did Africa Mean to Frederick Douglass?,” *Slavery and Abolition: A Journal of Slave and Post-Slave Studies* 36, no. 1 (2015): 40–62.

26. See Toyin Falola and Ann Genova, *Osira: Yoruba Gods and Spiritual Identity in Africa and the Diaspora* (Trenton, NJ: Africa World Press, 2006); Toyin Falola, *Èsù: Yoruba God, Power, and the Imaginative Frontiers* (Durham, NC: Carolina Academic Press, 2013); and George Chemeche, Donald J. Cosentino, and Vagner Gonçalves da Silva, *Eshu: The Divine Trickster* (Suffolk: Antique Collectors' Club, 2013).

27. Clyde W. Ford, *The Hero with an African Face: Mythic Wisdom of Traditional Africa* (New York: Bantam Books, 1999), 159.

28. Walter Rucker highlights the significance of nineteenth-century conjurers like Sandy by explaining that they were regarded as priests and by describing them as “a revolutionary vanguard inspiring and encouraging resistive behavior among their fellow slaves.” For W. E. B. Du Bois, too, this sort of spiritual leader functioned as “the healer of the sick, the interpreter of the Unknown, the comforter of the sorrowing, the supernatural avenger of the wrong.” Such is the role Douglass writes for Sandy in the narratives. See Walter Rucker, “Conjure, Magic, and Power: The Influence of Afro-Atlantic Religious Practices on Slave Resistance and Rebellion,” *Journal of Black Studies* 32, no. 1 (2001): 85–86; and W. E. B. Du Bois, *The Souls of Black Folk* (San Bernardino: Eucalyptus Press, 2013), 98.

29. Robinson, *Black Marxism*, 73.

30. See Fred Moten, interview by James Leo Cahill and Rachel Thompson, “The Insurgency of Objects: A Conversation with Fred Moten,” *Octopus* 1 (2005): 45–66; and Paul C. Taylor, *Black Is Beautiful: A Philosophy of Black Aesthetics* (Hoboken, NJ: Wiley-Blackwell, 2016). For additional theory and criticism about the African diaspora in conversation with Robinson, Moten, and other scholars of the Black radical tradition, see essay collections by Paul Gilroy, *Small Acts: Thoughts on the Politics of Black Cultures* (London: Serpent's Tail, 1993); Sidney Lemelle and Robin D. G. Kelley, *Imagining Home: Class, Culture and Nationalism in the African Diaspora* (New York: Verso, 1994); and Hortense Spillers, *Black, White, and in Color: Essays on American Literature and Culture* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2003); as well as Michelle M. Wright, *Becoming Black: Creating Identity in the African Diaspora* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2004); Patrick Manning, *The African Diaspora: A History through Culture* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2009); Henry Louis Gates Jr., *Tradition and the Black Atlantic: Critical Theory in the African Diaspora* (New York: Civitas Books, 2010); Toyin Falola, *The African Diaspora: Slavery, Modernity, and Globalization* (Rochester, NY: University of Rochester Press, 2013); and Christina Sharpe, *In the Wake: On Blackness and Being* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2016).

31. Robinson, *Black Marxism*, 177.

32. Garrison writes, “I am confident that it is essentially true in all its statements; that nothing has been set down in malice, nothing exaggerated, nothing drawn from the imagination; that it comes short of the reality, rather than overstates a single fact in regard to SLAVERY AS IT IS.” Phillips similarly writes, “We have known you long, and can put the most entire confidence in your truth, candor, and sincerity. Every one who has heard you speak has felt, and, I am confident, every one who reads your book will feel, persuaded that you give them a fair specimen of the whole truth.” See William Lloyd Garrison, preface to *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, An American Slave*, ed. William L. Andrews and William S. McFeely (New York: Norton, 1997), 7; and Wendell Phillips, “Letter from Wendell Phillips, Esq.,” in Andrews and McFeely, *Narrative*, 10–11.

33. Although it is not my focus here, this interpretation may have satisfied those predisposed to belief systems not normative to the West, such as Sandy and other descendants of Africa. In the *Narrative*, Douglass acknowledges the cryptic ambiguity with which he documents this episode in a footnote stating that Sandy "would claim [the] success as the result of the roots" (54n6).

34. Gilroy implies this conclusion in *The Black Atlantic*, where he argues that African spirituality is a proximate source for the enslaved person's decision to choose death over enslavement, suggesting it is the root that encourages Douglass to fight back. See Gilroy, *The Black Atlantic*, 56, 60–63, 68.

35. Such indiscernibility may be partly due to rhetorical restrictions. Privileging Sandy's root too highly ran the risk of alienating readers already struggling to overcome stereotypes. McFeely reminds us that Douglass's project was to increase "the degree to which a nineteenth-century white world took the ex-slave seriously as an intellectual," an undertaking hampered by overreaching. See William S. McFeely, "The Writing of the *Narrative*," in Andrews and McFeely, *Narrative*, 133.

36. Michel Foucault, *The Order of Things: An Archeology of Human Sciences*, ed. R. D. Laing (New York: Vintage Books, 1973), 168.

37. Detienne and Vernant, *Cunning Intelligence in Greek Culture and Society*, 47.

38. Kopelson, "Rhetoric on the Edge of Cunning," 131.

39. Detienne and Vernant note that, like conjure and rootwork, *mêtis* was often associated with magic and "spell-binding" in myth. See Detienne and Vernant, *Cunning Intelligence in Greek Culture and Society*, 189.

40. Under this rubric, *mêtis* (and the critical Blackness it affects) has always been a component of Western thought, as is evident in its mythological representations. *Mêtis* derives its name from the goddess Metis, a daughter of Ocean who became the first wife of Zeus and who mothered Athena. Detienne and Vernant explain that Metis's role as a trickster was central to the Olympic gods' victory over the Titans: "Without the help of [Metis], without the assistance of the weapons of cunning she controls through her magic knowledge, supreme power could neither be won nor exercised nor maintained." This same slipperiness is noticeable in her attempt to escape Zeus's sexual advances by altering the shape of her body, as described by Apollodorus of Athens. Zeus found Metis's aptitude for sly craftiness threatening, especially after he foresaw that she and her children constituted a risk to his sovereign power, so he swallowed his wife, thus incorporating her cunning. She is said to have continued to advise him as a disembodied voice, which draws the logical aspirations of episteme and the radical responses of *mêtis* under a single and dialectical rubric of knowledge. See Detienne and Vernant, *Cunning Intelligence in Greek Culture and Society*, 58; Apollodorus, *The Library of Greek Mythology*, trans. Robin Hard (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997), 1.3.6; and Hesiod, *Hesiod: Theogony, Works and Days, Shield*, ed. and trans. Apostolos N. Athanassakis (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, [1983] 2004), 886–900.

41. This strategy resonates with visual representations of the figure of *mêtis*. Bragg writes that *mêtis*, "in contrast to linear progress of logical thought, never goes forward in a straight line but is always weaving from side to side and looping back on itself." Dolmage notes that classical representations often relied on Hephaestus, a blacksmith whose feet are twisted backward or sideways, an "impairment" that allows him to move side-to-side. Although this disfigurement seems to be a handicap, it permits him to change directions unpredictably. See Lois Bragg, *Oedipus Borealis: The Aberrant Body in Old Icelandic Myth and Saga* (Cranbury, NJ: Fairleigh Dickinson University Press, 2004), 32; and Jay Dolmage, "Metis, *Mêtis*, *Mestiza*, Medusa: Rhetorical Bodies across Rhetorical Traditions," *Rhetorical Review* 28, no. 1 (2009): 6.

42. Dolmage, "Metis, *Mêtis*, *Mestiza*, Medusa," 9.

43. Moten, "The Insurgency of Objects," 63.

44. Houston A. Baker Jr., *The Journey Back: Issues in Black Literature and Criticism* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1980), 36–37.

45. Michel de Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life*, trans. Steven Rendall (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2011), 29.

46. These same passages appear in *My Bondage* accordingly: "You have, dear reader, seen me humbled, degraded, broken down, enslaved, and brutalized, and you understand how it was done; now let us see the converse of all this, and how it was brought about" (180).

47. Here I refer to the notion that slave narratives conventionally aspired to persuade white readers of the horrors of enslavement by appealing to the logic with which they were familiar. Andrews writes that white readership judged the first century of African American auto-

biography primarily by its reliability; this readership preferred narratives that left no space for interiority or subjectivity but concerned themselves instead with an objective/scientific gaze upon bondage. This convention has little tolerance for antagonistic aesthetics. See Andrews, *To Tell a Free Story*, 3–7.

48. Valerie Smith, *Self-Discovery and Authority in Afro-American Narrative* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1987), 20, 26.

49. Baker, *The Journey Back*, 26–46; and Anette Niemtow, “Autobiography: The Example 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 Press, 1982), 101.