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"I FELT SO TALL WITHIN"—ANTHROPOLOGY IN SLAVE NARRATIVES

Slavery—we all seem to know about it: that it is bad, that it was and is rampant in the human world, that it caused the Civil War in the United States in the 19th century; and also that it is at the origin of the race problem in the US.

We also seem to know what anthropology is: apart from social, ethnological, medical, biological and a few other anthropologies there is philosophical anthropology, however not very popular in the English speaking world.[1] Philosophical anthropology addresses the question: what does it mean to be human? The answer usually takes two forms: either it sets humans apart from animals or it tries to determine the essence of man. Between that there are many shades that are all variants of the Renaissance humanist definition of man as the peculiar being that, somewhere between beasts and God, determines itself.[2] If it is the essence of humans to define their essence, then humans as humans cannot be an object of empirical observation, even if one were dealing with an unknown tribe, but only of hermeneutical research into the ways how humans express their attitude towards themselves and to fellow humans insofar as they express, assert or

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[1] Both *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* and *Internet Encyclopedia of Philosophy* lack an entry "Anthropology."

[2] Of course, I am thinking of Giovanni Pico della Mirandola's notion of self-determination, as expressed in his famous *Oratio* (1486). This anthropology sets humans apart from animals and from higher beings by the ability so refer to oneself, which, however, culminates in approaching the level of God. References in Paul Richard Blum, *Philosophieren in der Renaissance* (Stuttgart: Kohlhammer, 2004), chapter 8.4.

otherwise state their own humanity. Needless to say that actions, work, and language are the most probable resources for that.[3]

One commonality of most anthropologies, even the existentialist ones, is to define a 'human being' as endowed with peculiar skills and somehow worthy of being elevated; and thus they tend to swerve into Sunday school exhortations and glorifications of "man as man," usually combined with normative virtue ethics.[4] The religious discourse about the fallibility of man is an antidote against optimism and yet not sufficient to constitute a philosophical anthropology, unless fallibility seen in non-exhortative terms (which contradicts religion and ethics), that is, the weakness of human beings as such and while interacting with fellow humans is identified as a marker of what makes a human, then including also the ability to strive for overcoming flaws.

Therefore I suggest looking at humans from the angle of their endangerment, from the moments of utter denial of humanity. What is it that is being denied; how does a human being survive at the fringes of humanity; and what is it that remains in spite of denial? Here I propose to read first person slave narratives with the question in mind: what makes a slave human? The answer will be universal: the humanity of a slave is truly human; it is the core of the meaning of being human; and the endangerment and denial of humanity to slaves yields an anthropology that by its origin and nature defies being denied.

Most American slave narratives are written with an abolitionist agenda, and most of them are taken from oral reports and recast according to the mind and capacity of the writer. The case of Nat Turner is interesting evidence: as an exception, it had been produced by an interviewer in order to expose the bad character of Turner while detained. It appears that the religious section of the text is rather authentic compared to the section on Turner's active rebellion. The reason is that the properly confessional parts are such that they could not have been forged by the interviewer, who was

[3] If these remarks appear to evoke Martin Heidegger, I may refer to my observations in "Rhetoric is the Home of the Transcendent: Ernesto Grassi's Response to Heidegger's Attack on Humanism," *Intellectual History Review*, 22 (2012): 261-287.

[4] See for example Thomas J. Higgins, *Man as Man. The Science and Art of Ethics* (Milwaukee: Bruce, 1949). Higgins takes, correctly, the definition of humans as the precondition for ethics. However, in applying Aristotle's Four Causes, he elevates 'man as man' to an ideal that then might be accomplished through ethics. The point is that anthropology cannot aim at ethics, at least not virtue ethics, because the baseness of human beings must be included in the anthropological study of humans, whereas ethics aims by definition at eliminating it. In methodical order, we may say: anthropology shows the reality that ethics is set to improve.

naturally alien to Turner's feelings.[5] As a matter of fact, those slave narratives are the closest we can get as first hand witnesses, and the writers only could work with the facts and the elements offered by the slaves. In that perspective those first person narratives—whether written by the slaves or reported by others—are as reliable and deserving interpretation as any first-hand witness. Consequently, I propose to read slave witness reports with a certain sensibility that pays attention not only to the horrors and appeals of the text but also to the importance given to details and to ask: what does it say about a slave as a human, and whatever it says it must be valid for the notion of humanity. Let me tell a few examples and see what we can get out of them.

In my examples, I will focus on three topics: *religion*, *names*, and *resistance*. As sources I will limit myself to Sojourner Truth, Frederick Douglass, and Octavia Albert. The first source is the narrative of the life of a slave woman as rendered by an empathic woman; the second, the autobiographical narrative of a slave turned abolitionist; the third is a collection of interviews written by an emancipated slave woman conducted with other slaves, mostly women. These sources are sufficiently diverse to serve as a specimen of how I suggest to understand slavery anthropologically and to investigate philosophically human nature with the help of sources that talk of the risk of being human.[6]

RELIGION

Sojourner Truth was a woman in the State of New York who was legally emancipated in the 19th century, fought for the liberation of her son and became an abolitionist prophetess. Her access to religion was at the same time hermeneutic and self-reliant:

> … when she was examining the scriptures, she wished to hear them without comment … In consequence of this, she ceased to ask adult persons to read the

[5] M. Cooper Harriss, "Where is the Voice Coming from? Rhetoric, Religion, and Violence in *The Confessions of Nat Turner*," *Soundings* 89 (2006) 135-170. Theoretical observations concerning anthropology in literary sources in James P. Spradley and George E. McDonough (eds.), *Anthropology through Literature* (Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 1975). Cf. M. Reinhardt's "Who Speaks for Margaret Garner? Slavery, Silence, and the Politics of Ventriloquism." *Critical Inquiry* 29, no. 1 (2002): 81-119, and idem *Who Speaks for Margaret Garner*? (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2010).

[6] The reader may trust me that I have read many more slave narratives und just chose these three in order to keep the material for the reader traceable.

> Bible to her, and substituted children in their stead. … . She wished to compare the teachings of the Bible with the witness within her; and she came to the conclusion, that the spirit of truth spoke in those records ... This is one among the many proofs of her energy and independence of character.[7]

What enabled her to have her own mind on religion? She had experienced religion in the distorted way of a slave. As her biographer reports:

> I asked her if her master, Dumont, ever whipped her? She answered, 'Oh yes, … And the most severe whipping he ever give me was because I was cruel to a cat.' At this time she looked upon her master as a God; and believed that he knew of and could see her at all times, even as God himself.[8]

We have here an analogy of proportion: a cat is to a human as a human to God; or: God is to slave owners as slave owners to slaves and slaves to animals. In scholastic philosophy we would have to ask: is the proportion only analogous, or does it express a unity on all levels? The episode also reminds us of aphorisms of the pre-Socratic Heraclitus who compared animals in relation to humans in order to explore the relation of humans to divinity. Dumont is cruel to a slave in order to correct the slave's cruelty to a pet. Said in this way the act appears unjust and disproportionate. The master treats a slave like a beast who treated a beast like a beast. The master, whom Sojourner viewed as a god, reveals himself as a god of correction and revenge; he reveals himself as unconditionally powerful. Instead of subduing the woman even further, his cruelty that outdoes her cruelty kindles in her the sense of the supreme eminence that now is looking for a true realization.
Sojourner Truth always had the feeling to presage decisive events. So, after she had escaped her master Dumont and lived legally with the Van Wagenens, one day she predicted that Mr. Dumont was coming, and he came. Strangely, she intended to return with him "home":

> He answered, with a smile, 'I shall not take you back again; you ran away from me.' Thinking his manner contradicted his words, she did not feel repulsed, but made herself and child ready …

Now, instead of pursuing Dumont's reaction we learn of her mystical musings:

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[7] Olive Gilbert, *Narrative of Sojourner Truth, a Northern Slave, Emancipated from Bodily Servitude by the State of New York, in 1828*: Electronic Edition, 108 f. http://docsouth.unc.edu/neh/truth50/truth50.html

[8] Ibid., 33.

> But, ere she reached the vehicle, she says that God revealed himself to her, with all the suddenness of a flash of lightning, showing her, 'in the twinkling of an eye, that he was all over'—that he pervaded the universe—'and that there was no place where God was not.' … But she plainly saw there was no place, not even in hell, where he was not: and where could she flee? … When at last … her attention was once more called to outward things, she observed her master had left, and exclaiming aloud, 'Oh, God, I did not know you were so big,' walked into the house, and made an effort to resume her work.[9]

This is too outrageous; it cannot have been invented by the interviewer. The episode sheds light on the meaning of religion among slaves. The turning point in her life comes when her master refuses to take her back, for the very reason that she ran away. We must be aware that running away used to be the worst thing a slave could do. Mr. Dumont acknowledges her spontaneous liberation. At least, it appeared to Isabella that way, because she was first puzzled by his attitude, not believing that he meant what he said. The only meaning she could find in his being her master and not taking her back after she fled had to be that he approved of her self-emancipation (as we may name it with little exaggeration), thus making his imputed ambiguity un-ambiguous. He had played the god-role in her life as a slave; now, in this very moment the true greatness of God reveals itself to her. She literally experienced autonomy granted from an autonomous and paradigmatic force.

In terms of anthropology, that is to say: to the slave, the master is the ideal and source of freedom. On the fringe of freedom, there is a spark of divinity and unconditional spontaneity, which in ordinary language amounts to religion.

And yet, there is one more aspect, to it. Mr. Dumont was her god, and that is why she longed prophetically to return home with him. We find more of the link between home and religion in Octavia Albert's interviews with slaves, which she published in 1890. In Charlotte's story we read:

> Aunt Jane asked me did the people have churches here. … She had religion, and she was as good a woman as you ever saw. She could read the Bible, and could sing so many pretty hymns. Aunt Jane said it seemed to her she was lost because she could not go to church and hear preaching and singing like she used to hear in Virginia. She said people didn't care for Sunday in Louisiana.[10]

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[9] Ibid., 65-66.

[10] Octavia V. Rogers Albert, *The House Of Bondage, or: Charlotte Brooks and Other Slaves* (New York: Hunt & Eaton, Cincinnati: Cranston & Stowe, 1890). Reprint: New York: Oxford University Press, 1988. Online available at http://docsouth.unc.edu.ezp.lndlibrary.org/neh/albert/menu.html and http://digilib.nypl.org/dynaweb/digs/wwm972/@Generic__BookView; 8f.

Unmistakably, "to have religion" means to have a home, because both women were displaced from Virginia. Leaving aside the tension between "American" and Catholic denominations, we read that religion is an identifying force for the slave:

> Old mistress used to have balls on Sunday. … Mistress's religion did not make her happy like my religion did. I was a poor slave, and every body knowed I had religion, for it was Jesus with me every-where I went. I could never hear her talk about that heavenly journey.[11]

Home may be Virginia or Heaven. "The older I got the more I thought of my mother's Virginia religion."[12] So she was happy to hear a minister sing:

> 'O where are the Hebrew children? Safe in the promised land.' I did not have religion when I came out here. … [But] I never would fail to say my prayers, and I just thought if I could get back to my old Virginia home to hear some of my mother's old-time praises it would do my soul good. But, poor me! I could never go back to my old Virginia home.[13]

Of course we could apply the Marxist adage and say: religion is the slave's opium. It is peculiarly revealing that in this text religion is something to 'have' and 'get'.[14] Religion, we are tempted to say, has turned into a commodity one can have or miss. On the other hand, slaves were a commodity, and hence they treated the transcendent in kind. But more importantly we can observe in this story that home, belonging, kinship, eschatology form a syndrome which expresses the self-assertion of the human being. Sojourner Truth was lucky to look up to her master as the temporary god, before she discovered divination and divinity in her inner self. Charlotte, thrown into the loss of home and family, clings to expressions of religion; and where *Heimat* is unattainable, it still remains as a promise. The desire is what remains when fulfillment is out of sight.

The famous master-slave dialectics (on which I cannot dwell, here) is obvious in the god-like Dumont who frees his slave by the word and makes her believe in the real big god. More earthly is Frederick Douglass's account of the role of religion in slavery, expressing the enlightened perspective of

[11] Ibid., 34.
[12] Ibid., 4 f.
[13] Ibid., 6.
[14] The expression "have/had religion" and "get/got religion" appear frequently in the book.

an abolitionist. He commented upon the scarce permission to slaves to observe the Christian holidays:

> I believe them to be among the most effective means in the hands of the slaveholder in keeping down the spirit of insurrection.[15]

He sees religious feasts as "safety-valves"[16] for the suppressed sprits of the slaves. On the other hand, the secret meetings in which he discussed with fellow slaves the Scripture were at the same time means of education and – within his narrative—the seed of self-liberation. Many slave owners had a double standard of religious apartheid; they effectively Jim Crowed salvation. In showing such blatant inconsistence they spurned the craving for the transcendent. From Douglass it is obvious that critique of religion was not within reach of the slaves, it appears to be a post-liberation achievement, as in Douglass himself. Upon writing his autobiography he was able to observe that "after his conversion, [his master] found religious sanction and support for his slaveholding cruelty."[17] As a slave he ran twice a Sabbath school for the fellow slaves to learn "to read the will of God," as he whimsically explains, and he was not ashamed of ascribing the beginning of his self-liberation to the use a magic root, which he obtained from a wise friend.[18]

Looking at these findings, it appears clear to me that under the given conditions and with all necessary precautions we may state that slave narratives reveal something like a natural religion so that we may conclude, again with all due qualifications, that religiosity appears to be an anthropological given. This is especially true because it is the target of suppression and its means; it is also the means of liberation that can be abandoned once liberation has been achieved; it is what master and slave share and what tells them apart. I dare say, this finding is peculiar to the slave situation as narrated by the witnesses.

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[15] Quoted in Gilbert, *Sojourner Truth*, 64. Frederick Douglass, *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, an American Slave* (Boston: Anti-Slavery Office, 1847), chapter 9, 74.

[16] Douglass, *Narrative*, chapter 9, 75. In the case of Douglass, I restrict my references to the first version of his autobiographies, because the second and third versions contain self-interpretations that, as valuable as they are, depart stylistically from the tone of first-person narrative.

[17] Douglass, *Narrative*, chapter 9, 54. The author felt compelled to justify his critical remarks in the Appendix of the book, 118-125.

[18] Ibid., chapter 9, 55, chapter 10, 70 and 80-82.

NAMES

Sojourner Truth and Frederick Douglass both chose their names for themselves. As Douglass reported:

> The slave is a human being, divested of all rights – reduced to the level of a brute-a mere "chattel" in the eye of the law … —his name, which the "recording angel" may have enrolled in heaven, among the blest, is impiously inserted in a *master's ledger,* with horses, sheep, and swine.[19]

In this theoretical statement, Douglass locates the function of name between property, law, and heaven. He takes for granted that a human being has a name, that the individuality of the person must have a guardian, for instance an angel, and that a name goes beyond bookkeeping. Let us assume the slave holder knows all that. This means that the denial of a personal name denies humanity to a chattel-slave—ergo a name is what makes up a human being.
At this point it might be worth reflecting on the 'chattel' nature of slavery. From the legal and economic point of view it is well known and uncontested that slaves were treated as chattel, as movable property on a similar level as tools or cattle (no pun possible). Without engaging in Aristotle's famous definition of slaves as 'tools with a soul', it is obvious that slaves were a specific kind of property, closer to domesticated animals than to dead tools. It happens, but mostly jesting, that modern people give utilities a name (especially cars, or very important devices); but to name a slave entails the paradox of denying and recognizing the humanity of a slave. So it is intuitively clear that the denial of a proper name instrumentalizes the slave, while imposing a name on him or her is a second rate acknowledgment of the status of the slave, superior to any tool, but on a par with a pet or livestock.
If we follow this line of thought that slaves play a role similar to livestock, we come to surprising observations. René Girard has explained that the root of holding livestock is not the economic advantage of having domesticated animals ready for work and consumption. Rather, humans lived together with animals as the potential victim whose sacrifice serves to stabilize community and to reconcile with the transcendent. The economic usefulness of domestication evolved only over a very long time. It is therefore possible to speculate that African slaves, as they appeared in the life of farmers in

[19] Frederick Douglass, "The Nature of Slavery," in Howard Brotz (ed.), *African-American Social and Political Thought 1850-1920* (New Brunswick, N.J.: Transaction Publishers, 1992), 216.

America, were immediately welcome as labor force, of course, but at the same time perceived to be livestock. On livestock Girard says: "The domestication of animals requires that men keep them in their company and treat them, not as wild animals, but as if they were capable of living near human beings and leading a quasi-human existence."[20] A very similar structure occurred in American slavery: the Africans inevitably lived close to their masters so that they could not possibly be treated just as tools; rather, they had to be granted a quasi-human level of life. One move to keep the difference patent was to deny the ownership of a name. It is also intuitively obvious that this closeness at a reinforced distance made the slave prone to victimization in the Girardian sense; but that is not at issue, here.

But if we set aside all we know about the meaning of naming and just look at what happened to Sojourner and Frederick, we can glean the importance of names on the anthropological level. The first thing that should be noted is that all slave narratives awkwardly refer to slaves not plainly by their names ("there was Jack", or "Jim") but with the epithet "a slave named Jack." It seems to have been wired in the grammar of slave narrative that names are always arbitrarily given and hence do not naturally and necessarily name one unique individual. Jack as a person cannot be a slave; the topic of the story is not Jack but the slave who happens to have that name.
Sojourner's original name was Isabella.[21] When she enters the service of Van Wagenen she receives his as her surname, and her biographer explains:

> … a slave's surname is ever the same as his master; that is, if he is allowed to have any other name than Tom, Jack, or Guffin. Slaves have sometimes been severely punished for adding their master's name to their own.[22]

An example of this practice can be found in Octavia Albert's stories: The son of a white man was not allowed to bear his father's name, so the mother gave him her name.[23]

Eventually, Isabella feels her calling to become a preacher and lecturer, and that is the moment she chooses for herself the name Sojourner.[24] We

[20] René Girard, *Things Hidden since the Foundation of the World* (Stanford: University Press, 1987), 69.
[21] Gilbert, *Sojourner Truth*, 13.
[22] Ibid., 44.
[23] Albert, 158 f.
[24] Gilbert, *Sojourner Truth*, p. 100.

have no record of her rationale for her name,[25] so we only can take it at face value: the self-emancipated slave woman proclaims the truth of her elementary human situation, as the Bible says:

> For we are strangers before thee, and sojourners, as were all our fathers: our days on the earth are as a shadow, and there is none abiding. (1 Chron 29:15)

Whereas Frederick Douglass changed his names haphazardly, and eventually accepted one suggested incidentally by a friend, Sojourner chose one to express her state in life. And yet, both come together, because Sojourner's message is that of transience. Therefore, beyond the more sophisticated mechanisms of naming and necessity, we may state that contingency and fortuitousness come to the forefront in slave narratives. Interestingly, Frederick Douglass does not spend much time on explaining the first occasions when he changed his name; he simply states in a footnote that at some point, after his escape he had changed his name from Frederick Bailey to Johnson.[26] He then explains that he had inherited the name Bailey from his parents, but he dropped the additional middle names that were given to him by his mother. Immediately after his departure from Baltimore Frederick called himself Stanley, obviously a simple disguise. Then he picked the name Johnson, which incidentally was also that of the couple that received him in New Bedford. Since this name was all too common, he asked his host to find him a new name, or rather, he "gave Mr. Johnson the privilege" to do so:

> Mr. Johnson had just been reading the 'Lady of the Lake,' and at once suggested that my name be 'Douglass.' From that time until now I have been called 'Frederick Douglass;' and as I am more widely known by that name than by either of the others, I shall continue to use it as my own.[27]

Douglass, as a gifted writer, creates the punch line that emphasizes the claim that his name is what he adopts (however also with regard to "the others") rather than being adopted. A few lines before Douglass emphasizes that this privilege of naming did not extend to his first name: "I must hold onto that [first name], to preserve a sense of my identity."

One interviewee in Octavia Albert's collection includes names in a list of the most essential things black slaves were missing:

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[25] Nell Irvin Painter, *Sojourner Truth: A Life, a Symbol* (New York: W.W. Norton, 1996), 75.
[26] Douglass, *Narrative*, 110.
[27] Douglass, *Narrative*, 112.

> Twenty-seven years ago we did not own a foot of land, not a cottage in this wilderness, not a house, not a church, not a school-house, not even a name. We had no marriage-tie, not a legal family—nothing but the public highways, closely guarded by black laws and vagrancy laws, upon which to stand.[28]

From this list we gather that in his later age the speaker held it to be natural that a human being has a place to stay, social institutions, marriage and family, and a name.

RESISTANCE

Many of the stories in Victoria Albert's book narrate about slaves escaping into the woods. There was no need to explain why they hid, of course. But for us it is important to see, to what length a fugitive is willing to go rather than to return to the master. Again, as a matter of course, that needs no explanation, because Victoria Albert reports these stories for the very purpose of illustrating the cruelty of the slaveholders. From the anthropological point of view, however, it is important that humans are able to risk their life and to choose one misery over another. At one point we read on the subject of running away:

> Aunt Charlotte said to me, 'I tell you, my child, nobody could get me to run away in those Louisiana swamps. Death is but death, and I just thought if I'd run off in those swamps I'd die. I used to hear old people say it was just as well to die with fever as with ague; and that is what I thought. …'[29]

That seems to contradict the general impulse to escape; at least it shows the options a slave had to weigh. Those many slaves that did hide in the woods or made it to the Underground Railroad chose to be masters of their own suffering rather than the victims of their masters' wrath.

One interesting incident in this collection is that of Nellie Johnson. She is described as almost white and good looking. After she was recaptured from an attempted escape she was forced to dress as a harlequin and a male with "deer-horns on her head to punish her, with bells on them."[30] This was certainly a mockery and revenge from the side of the slave owners for her

[28] Albert, 144.
[29] Albert, 22 f.
[30] Albert, 21.

daringness that betrayed masculinity and resolve—features not imputed on slaves, let alone women. This is the only case narrated in which the punishment was not physically cruel but psychological and social. For that very reason it allows interpreting the standard punishment by beating and other physical abuse as inherently attacking the status and humanity of the fugitive slaves. Fleeing is what a human being can freely choose.

One of the most cruel stories about escaping slaves is that of Hattie, and the plot is this: she was abused by her mistress and forced to serve as the sex-slave to her owner's son, of whom she had two or three children. Hattie is described as losing one of her children in the woods, which she buried in a piece of her clothing. Consequently, she is almost naked, and her being naked is emphasized repeatedly in this short story that ends in Hattie being captured and beaten to death.[31] We can compliment Victoria Albert for the impressive density of her rendering this case, and yet, there would have been nothing to tell if it had not happened—and there is no reason to doubt that. This story of the almost nude woman, mourning in the woods ("I had my child here in the woods; it is dead and I buried it in a piece of my frock-shirt.") is like an emblem to tell us that resistance does not need weapons or ruses; it originates from the naked existence of being human.

The *Narrative of Sojourner Truth* tells of an interesting case of retribution by a slave. A slave woman was appointed to tend to her ailing master who had been particularly mean and cruel.

> She was very strong, and was therefore selected to support her master, as he set up in bed, by putting her arms around while she stood behind him. It was then that she did her best to wreak her vengeance on him. She would clutch his feeble frame in her iron grasp, as in a vice; and, when her mistress did not see, would give him a squeeze, a shake, and lifting him up, set him down again, as hard as possible. ... She was afraid the disease alone would let him recover, —an event she dreaded more than to do wrong herself. Isabella asked her, if she were not afraid his spirit would haunt her. 'Oh, no,' says Soan; 'he was so wicked, the devil will never let him out of hell long enough for that.'[32]

The narrator Olive Gilbert adds to that some observations on the cluelessness of slaveholders concerning the mood and feelings of their slaves, which are also to be found in Douglass's *Narrative*. However, Soan's motive is interesting of itself. She is aware of being strong and physically able; she

[31] Albert, 70-73.
[32] Gilbert, 83-84.

has a sense of revenge; she works with the natural course of the illness, making sure it ends fatal; she believes in the ghosts and the devil but not in the moral evil she is committing. When the physical prowess has turned to her advantage, she exerts cruelty on her tormentor, the only difference being that she has to act stealthily and slyly. What makes her competitive with her owner is her capability of scheming and purposefully exerting physical power. Morality set aside, what makes her superior to her master is her ability and resolve to torment another with the fatal end in view, whereas the slaveholder only had been thoughtlessly wicked. She has wickedness on her side being convinced that the master of all wickedness would hold the ghost of her victim at bay.

In terms of Girard's victimization theory, Soan is probably mimicking the violence of her master. In that sense she is emphasizing through her action the mechanism of victimization: the master did not need torment for his own survival but only for his entertainment and positioning as the master. His victim, however, exposes this very relationship by activating violence with a terminal physical goal.

In Isabella/Sojourner's own life her rescue of her son who had been sold South is an interesting example of the humanity of resistance. We cannot but be amazed by her naiveté with which she fought legally for her son. But the opening scene of this event is telling about her motivation: after her former mistress had ridiculed her for that "*fuss to make about a little nigger*"[33] Isabella spoke of her trust in God and herself:

> I was sure God would help me to get him. Why, I felt so tall within – I felt as if the power of a nation was with me![34]

Resistance, retribution, revenge, and escape – they all are rooted in the fundamental awareness of oneself. The capability to choose death, one's own or that of the oppressor, is the capability to be consciously oneself. This Self may well extend to humanity or, in Sojourner Truth's language, "a nation".

Frederick Douglass, with a keen eye for human nature, has written a monument to slave resistance in the description of his standoff with his master. Let us remind ourselves that for Douglass's fellow slaves it was "considered as being bad enough to be a slave ; but to be a poor man's slave was deemed a disgrace indeed," because slaves were trained to see themselves 'trans-

[33] Gilbert, 45.
[34] Ibid.

ferring' the personal value of their master upon themselves.[35] To become conscious of the derivative nature of the self was an important step towards inner emancipation. Hence, to despise a slave owner could of itself be an act of rebellion long before any attempt at violence or evasion could be envisioned. This is the background against which we should read Douglass's brawl with Mr. Covey, as narrated in the tenth chapter.[36] He alerts his reader about the importance of the event: "You have seen how a man was made a slave; you shall see how a slave was made a man."[37] Of course, it was the individual slave Frederick who was 'made a man', and there may be implications regarding slave masculinity, but the event is also symbolic as it depicts an essential feature of being a man in the sense of being human.

As Mr. Covey, the slave breaker, tried to whip Douglass, "[h]e held on to me, and I to him." The slave manages to get at the master's throat "causing the blood to run". (71) This standoff, I think, is crucial. The first slave who happened to pass by tried to help his master, but was kicked off by Douglass, which had the almost comical effect that Covey's "courage quailed" and he asked the slave if he "meant to persist in his resistance" (71 f.). What a question! The next slave flatly refused to interfere with the argument he was not hired "to help whip" another slave. So we have the violent defeat of one slave and the legalistic opposition of another surrounding the stalemate. This is the point when the slave breaker gives up "saying that if I had not resisted, he would not have whipped me half so much." Douglass adds immediately that Covey had not whipped him at all. Covey becomes ridiculous through his childish after-threat of tormenting only "half so much" leaving it open what the other half would have looked like.

What Covey must have realized without understanding was the definite turn of superiority. In Douglass's words: "he had drawn no blood from me, but I had from him." (72) The brawl made it physically visible that the master was a coward and the slave 'a man'. We should notice that Douglass did not beat his master, the standoff was what he needed to assert his position: when two people get even they may return to their natural humanity. "The

[35] Douglass, *Narrative*, 20.

[36] Margaret Kohn, "Frederick Douglass's Master-Slave Dialectic," *The Journal of Politics*, 67, No. 2 (May, 2005): 497-514, says correctly (500), "Although the fight with Covey did bring about a cessation to the brutal beatings he had endured, the emancipatory consequences were primarily psychological in nature." However, the anthropological meaning goes beyond the personal psychological effect. Kohn has the further relevant literature on the case.

[37] Douglass, *Narrative*, 65 f.

physical struggle dragged Covey into a moment of equilibrium; it was a point at which the only way for any of them to survive was by moving *upward*."[38] That is, the impasse opened the way back to humanity. The slave breaker's fault was not violence as such but the inherent cowardice that consists in denying a fellow human a chance to be human. Therefore it was sufficient for the slave to exert as much violence as needed to show equality on the level of physical competition. Once again, what broke Covey's ability to subdue Douglass was the confluence of three types of resistance: the non-fatal violent back fighting, the physical defeat of one slave by another, and the rational verbal defiance of another slave. These might be the major components of all resistance and rebellion. We should not be surprised seeing Douglass summarize the meaning of this moment in a hymnal religious tone: "I felt as I never felt before. It was a glorious resurrection, from the tomb of slavery, to the heaven of freedom." The restoration of the human essence is expressed, if not caused, by the act of resistance.

Later, Douglass concluded that resistance as such might also persuade slaveholders to renounce on slavery by appealing to their conscience when they learn to perceive slaves as not voluntarily submitting to their control, thus breaking the vicious circle that slaves admit to be inferior through being submissive.[39] However, I think this is not a moral appeal but one that is rooted in the structure of self-ssertion. "I did not hesitate to let it be known of me, that the white man who expected to succeed in whipping, must also succeed in killing me." This concluding remark to the Covey episode (p. 73) may be read as a challenge, but it actually says that slavery (being whipped) is the negation of humanity (being killed). Hence resistance may be just, may be moral, may be a psychological urge, a habit, a duty, a last resort—in the anthropological sense it is the feature of being non-denied to exist. In Sojourner Truth's words, it is a 'power of a nation'; in Douglass's terms it is a resurrection before death. Sojourner's defiance and Douglass's standoff express what Aunt Charlotte expressed as the right to establish the terms of one's death.

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[38] Lewis R. Gordon, *Existentia Africana. Understanding Africana Existential Thought* (New York/London: Routledge, 2000), 61. (Italics in the original.)

[39] Bernard Boxhill, "Two Traditions in African American Political Philosophy," *The Philosophical Forum* 24, no. 1-3, Fall-Spring 1992-93: 119-135; 129 f. Further considerations, derived from Douglass's later political stances in Bernard R. Boxhill, "The Fight with Covey," in Lewis R. Gordon (ed.), *Existence in Black. An Anthology of Black Existential Philosophy* (New York/London: Routledge, 1997), 273-290.

CONCLUSION

If we look at these episodes from the point of view of René Girard, we find a few puzzling components. Here is not the place to investigate the slaveholders' roles in victimizing African people in order to establish the American society.[40] For that approach we would have to look into the justification of slavery from their perspective. The interesting question that arises from reading the slave narratives is this: are there traces of the mimetic cycle? The mimetic cycle, in Girard's anthropology, consists in jealousy for *being the other* as exemplified or fetishized in the other's possession.[41] In the religious sphere, we see that the slaves in Louisiana do not covet the masters' religion; rather, they (and at least their reporter, Victoria Albert) utterly despise it, as does Douglass. Sojourner Truth receives the notion of divinity from looking at her master – and outdoes him in all respects. The spark of divinity she obtains from domination sets her free. So, in this sphere we may say the mimetic cycle does not work upwards. Which reminds, again, of the fight with Covey: Douglass fights not in order to *be* Covey, he fights in order to make Covey at least as human as he, Douglass, just realized to be. It may be the case that Douglass was fighting for recognition by his tormentor and that this motive prevented him from killing him; but the case of Soan in Sojourner Truth's story shows that self-assertion of a slave may not depend of the master's survival. Therefore it is likely that Girard's theory that desire for recognition as the basis of every duel[42] does not apply to the slaves of our narratives. The slave Frederick does not covet Covey's cowardice; he wants to liberate himself from that cowardice that would keep him to be a slave.[43] It is plain and easy to understand that

[40] A few passing remarks on this topic in Martha Reineke, "Mimetic Violence and Nella Larsen's *Passing*: Toward a Critical Consciousness of Racism," *Contagion: Journal of Violence, Mimesis, and Culture*, 5, Spring 1998: 74-97; 77. Some brief remarks on slavery in Plato and Aristotle in René Girard, *Evolution and Conversion: Dialogues on the Origins of Culture* (London: T & T Clark (Continuum), 2009), 146 f.

[41] See for instance René Girard and Benoît Chantre, *Battling to the End. Conversations with Benoît Chantre* (East Lansing: Michigan State University Press, 2010), 31. Quite succinct in René Girard, *I See Satan Fall Like Lightning* (Maryknoll: Orbis, 2001), 19-46.

[42] Girard, *Battling*, p. 32.

[43] Compare with this Girard, *Battling*, p. 31: "The rivals increasingly resemble one another; rivalry produces twins. One of them may win out over the other and regain his illusion of autonomy; the other will then be humiliated to the point of seeing his adversary as sacred." In spite of the 'equality' between Covey and Douglass and the humiliation, this is not what happened there because neither coveted the other, not even unconsciously.

naming is as close as one can come to mimicking the other. However, the namelessness that has been imparted on slaves deprives them of an essential feature of a human being, but at the same time it keeps them from *being like* their tormentors. So in naming their slaves randomly the slave owners also reminded every single individual of their not being their master. Not to mistake one's master for a model might have been beneficial for the slaves in their quest for humanity. So, in a Girardian perspective, we learn that the mimetic cycle and the resulting violence and victimization is broken on the level of utter denial.

This brings to further general conclusions. Religion, onomastic identity, and resistance take on very strange forms on the level of slavery; and it is this we can learn from the slave narratives and the facts they convey. As we saw, critique of religion requires religious freedom. We may also state that onomastic identity is an absolute requirement of being human, so much that it does *de facto* not depend on a legitimate name-giver. Ultimately humans are baptized as wanderers on this earth. And resistance and rebellion? In all three sources we see that morality is not a condition of being human it comes only after humanity ceased being questioned.

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„W ŚRODKU CZUŁEM SIĘ TAK DUMNY" – ANTROPOLOGIA W NARRACJACH NIEWOLNIKÓW

S t r e s z c z e n i e

„Co to znaczy być człowiekiem w obliczu niewoli". Autor analizuje trzy autobiograficzne dokumenty afroamerykańskich niewolników z XVIII/XIX wieku (Sojourner Truth, Victoria Albert i Frederick Douglass), pytając, czy pozwalają one dokonać nowego wglądu w antropologię. Niewolnicy są w stanie zachować swoje człowieczeństwo w obliczu fizycznej i ideologicznej jego negacji, potrafią oddzielić swoją cielesną kondycję od poczucia człowieczeństwa. Wszelkiego rodzaju deprywacje pokazują, paradoksalnie, to, co jest istotne dla człowieka – w niniejszym studium są to religia, imię i opór. Autor pokazuje również, w jakim zakresie do struktur niewolnictwa znajduje zastosowanie antropologia René Girarda.

Przełożył Stanisław Sarek

"I FELT SO TALL WITHIN"— ANTHROPOLOGY IN SLAVE NARRATIVES

S u m m a r y

"What does it mean to be human in the face of slavery?" I will examine three autobiographical documents from African-American slaves of the 18th/19th century (Sojourner Truth, Victoria Albert, and Frederick Douglass) and ask: do they allow for new insight into anthropology? Slaves are able to be human in the face of physical and ideological denial of their humanity. Humans can separate their bodily conditions from themselves. Deprivations of all kinds show, paradoxically, what is essential to human beings: in this study, religion, name, and

resistance. I will also show to what extent René Girard's anthropology applies to the structure of slavery.

Summarised by Paul Richard Blum

Key words: anthropology, slavery, autobiographical slave narratives, René Girard.
Słowa kluczowe: antropologia, niewolnictwo, autobiograficzne narracje niewolników, René Girard.