The Rhetoric of Sound: Listening to Frederick Douglass's 1845 Narrative

Research in Sound

Combats Ignorance and Southern Propaganda and Opinion
- In his Narrative, Douglass brings the soundscape of the plantation and slavery to his readers through his telling, which, however, Northerners have not been to a plantation, or seen or heard slavery. They are ignorant of the cruelty and reality of slavery because the sounds of slavery are not a part of their everyday life. Northerners have the opportunity to hear and experience the sounds of slavery through Douglass's Narrative. (Furlong & Schaefer, 3rd paragraph)

Silence represents pain, anguish, and powerlessness, especially the female slaves: “while illustrating his own silence, Douglass illustrates the women’s experience, whose dialogue is reduced to mainly profanity) and disrupts Southerners’ portrayal of the south as a place of quietude and tranquility worth of protection. (Stover)

Also, slaveholders tried to make this image a reality as they attempted to control the soundscape of their plantations (i.e. regulating the times in which vocal slavers could sing in the fields, imposing silence on slaves to create quiet, but allowing and encouraging sounds of industry and industriousness: slaves working in the fields, in the blacksmithy, grinding grain, etc.) (Smith). Encourages Audiences to Listen and Challenges their listening
- With Douglass, audiences are encouraged to listen to slaves' voices and to imagine themselves in their situations. Douglass's use of sound is a form of resistance and rebellion against the oppressive silence of slavery. Douglass challenges listeners' association of nonverbal sound with blackness and associating it with the master (i.e. depicting Captain Anthony aroused by the sounds of Hester's screams and placing her screams at the beginning and end of the scene to indicate them as sounds to listen to, not noise relegated to the background. (Stover)

Symbolizes Power and Hierarchy
- Speech as a form of sound in the Narrative symbolizes power, as those who have dialogue or are speaking in a scene are in positions of power and usually members of the dominant group (i.e. masters, overseers, and later Douglass as he gains literacy and becomes an active speaker). (Glen & Lee)

Research in Silence

Cheryl Glenn & Rhetoric of Silence: all silence has meaning and it's an important part of our experience

Communicates the Reality of Slavery
- In his Narrative, Douglass displays communal silence, silence as a shared experience within the slave community as “slaveholders expected their African American property to be silent inferiors” (Jones 4).

Silence is present and identified in each chapter as he shares about other slaves (i.e. Aunt Hester—silenced by the whip and unable to articulate her experience, young old Barney—the horse carter who are forced to listen to their master’s commands and receive punishment in silence, Demby—the slave who goes refusing to answer or obey Mr. Gore, Henrietta and Mary—never speak a word in their scene and work around their master and mistress in silence (Glenn).

Negative silence is present in the scene where Aunt Hester is being whipped as young Douglass is stuck speechless. In the face of such violence, torture, and dehumanization. Also displayed through his inability to describe the emotions he felt in this moment: silence due to being powerless not to be overlooked as passivity. (Jones)

Communicates powerlessness, pain, marginalization:
- Douglass's narrative silence, as a "voiceless observer" who is not allowed to speak and only be a witness, communicates and symbolizes the marginalization of the slave as they are not allowed to speak and thus be a part of the dominant discourse. (Lee)

Silence represents pain, anguish, and powerlessness, especially the female slaves: "who illustrating his own silence, Douglass illustrates the women’s pain through their own silence...[repeatedly] the black women of this book are tortured and humiliated yet denied any means of expression or escape” (Lee 53).

Frederick Douglass As Orator

Douglass deliberately used aural strategies to immerse and persuade his audiences in his speeches: mimicry/variation in tone, weaving nonverbal sounds of slavery into his written text, communicating a visual image of slavery (i.e. describing slaves groaning under the weight of their wounds, and the blood dripping from lash wounds). Douglass grew up in the oral tradition of the slave community which included story-telling, religious preaching, and singing. As a child he witnessed storytellers oral style that included: "producing sounds and noises to enhance a story" (Lampe 3). Douglass was very aware of his audience: ignorant and majority prejudiced northern whites and pro-slavery supporters. Thus, he would delibrate with his rhetoric so he tried to present his argument in a way his listeners could understand, relate to as human beings and through their senses without diminishing the message. As a result, he challenged his audience to listen, immersed them, and moved them.

My Argument

In his classic slave narrative, Douglass uses both silence and sound to portray the reality of slavery, immerse his audience, combat Southerners/Slaveowners’ narrative, and show that slaves are not content and still resist.