

# “Within the Circle”: Space and Surveillance in Frederick Douglass’s *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, an American Slave*

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**Abstract:** The detailed and chilling descriptions of physical violence in many slave narratives often overshadow the fact that slaveholders in the American South also relied on an intricate system of surveillance to control and exploit their slaves. In this essay, I argue that Frederick Douglass’s first autobiography *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, an American Slave* pictures surveillance, especially its production of space, as a central tool of slavery. The resulting spatial boundaries are invested with metaphorical meaning and serve as an expression of Douglass’s emancipation. The first part of the paper considers the plantation architecture and outlines how overseers, slave patrols and panopticism create seemingly impermeable boundaries for Douglass, which are both of physical and psychological nature. I further demonstrate how the architecture of Baltimore’s city space leads to a loosening of surveillance and allows Douglass to become literate. Finally, I draw on Jurij Lotmann’s theory of aesthetic space in order to analyze how spatial boundaries are crossed and metaphorical boundaries between whiteness and blackness are rendered contingent in the *Narrative*.

In his *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, an American Slave*,<sup>1</sup> Frederick Douglass often appeals directly to the reader. His autobiography is an impassioned call for the abolition of slavery and was aimed mostly at free, white citizens of the American North. When he talks about his attitude toward the desperate songs of his fellow slaves, however, Douglass addresses his audience very subtly: “I was myself within the circle; so that I neither saw nor heard as those without might see and hear” (27). The different interpretations of Douglass’ spatial metaphor determine who exactly is addressed, since the circle can stand for the plantation, the South, or slavery itself. More noteworthy in this regard is Douglass’s connection between a

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1 The text will be called *Narrative* throughout the paper and all quotes refer to the same edition.

location in space and its influence on perception. He urges “those without” to put themselves into his position because his view on the world is structured by a space radically different from theirs. Throughout the *Narrative*, Douglass finds himself in highly hierarchical and bounded spaces whose power structures influence his movements, words, and even his gaze. There are tight regulations about who watches and who is watched, what is visible and what is invisible, which space is open and which space is closed. These binarisms are created by the surveillance of Douglass’s masters and represent an obstacle to his escape and construction of identity and subjectivity. Consequently, he expresses his struggle with slavery and his eventual emancipation through the interplay of surveillance and space.

My exploration of this topic begins with an analysis of the different boundaries described in the *Narrative*. On the plantation, they appear to be omnipresent and impermeable, even though the number of overseers often dwarfs the number of slaves. In order to explain this pervasiveness of plantation surveillance, I draw on the scholarly discourse on panopticism in the *Narrative* and discuss the importance of Bentham’s and Foucault’s concepts for the connection between surveillance and space. The first section analyzes city space and elaborates on how the social, economic, and architectural structures of Baltimore lead to a decrease in scrutiny and allow Douglass to take the first steps toward freedom. This analysis serves as the groundwork for the second section, which shows that the spatial boundaries are mirrored by metaphorical ones dividing the literary space of the *Narrative*. Following Jurij Lotmann’s theories, I trace Douglass’s rhetorical way along these lines with an emphasis on his use of the Christian discourse of his former masters and on his depiction of the fight with Covey.

Just as the *Narrative* describes Douglass’s attempts to transgress the spatial boundaries restricting his mobility, it is also itself an attempt to bridge the metaphorical boundaries of person/nonperson and whiteness/blackness. I thus argue that the dynamics of space and surveillance on the plantation and in the city are mirrored by metaphorical boundaries in the literary space, and that Douglass’ struggle to demonstrate the personhood of black slaves is expressed through the traversal of spatial boundaries and the deconstruction of metaphorical ones.

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## **DRAWING BOUNDARIES**

### **The Blood-Stained Gate: Plantation Space and Surveillance**

The *Narrative* is a text pervaded by boundaries. An analysis of their metaphorical importance cannot be undertaken without asking some fundamental questions first. What or who creates these boundaries, and why? How does Douglass portray them? Is there a difference between boundaries on the plantation and in the city? Who is able to cross them? This section aims to answer these questions by connecting research on the relation between surveillance and slavery to Douglass’s autobiography and by pointing out the different surveillance methods which play a role in the construction of boundaries. The first question I consider is a very broad one: What is the interrelation of surveillance and space?

If we follow Lefebvre and his argument that space is a social product (Hallet 14), and further assume that surveillance is a social practice, then the connection between the two becomes clear: Surveillance can produce space, order our perception of space and define the meaning we attach to it. By the same token, the power structures inherent in a space can predetermine which surveillance methods are feasible or desirable for the watchers—who, in regard to the plantation, can be both the masters and the slaves. In the *Narrative*, the body of the slave is confronted with the spatial implications of surveillance at every turn: Presence and absence, inside and outside, movement and rest are all dictated and controlled by a system of overseers, slave passes and slave patrols. Douglass depicts a kind of surveillance which, as Rosen states, serves mainly “to influence and control [...] actions through applied pressure” (234). This surveillance is based on the physical punishment of transgressions—geographical and otherwise. Douglass describes whippings, beatings, torture, execution and starvation (37-38, 47, 74). As a result, the slave and his body are subjected to “surveillance as coercion” (Rosen 245).

The most important reason for the surveillance of the plantation and the rigid circumscription of its boundaries was the efficient and unscrupulous extraction of work.<sup>2</sup> In order to keep and exploit valuable slaves, the slaveholders had to constrict

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2 There are more dimensions to surveillance than the exertion of control. Bhabha suggests that the power derived from watching is inextricably bound with pleasure. He borrows the Lacanian term *scopic drive* in order to add another dimension to the surveillance of colonial subjects (76). The same thought is found in Bontemps, who characterizes Southern slaveholders as “observant and perceptive, [...] voyeuristic and curious” (20). In Douglass’s text, Covey seems to display an obsessive lust in observing when he “[watches] every motion of the slaves” for hours (69). In the

and control their movements. They realized that “the mastery of human beings thrived upon the mastery of space; that overseers oversaw both the slaves and the terrain; and that the white regime enforced obedience not only by employing violence but by restricting mobility and spatial privacy” (Finseth 243). Douglass emphasizes the importance of “spatial privacy” both in terms of identity construction and resistance. The fields are a place of tight schedules and constant surveillance (25). Accordingly, field workers have little time or energy for themselves, which leads to “mental darkness” (85) and “the dark night” (71) of apathy. Furthermore, surveillance creates clear boundaries inside and around the plantation. One example for this is Colonel Lloyd’s garden, where slaves are forbidden to enter by threat of whipping (29). Douglass also narrates the cases of a slave woman who violates her curfew and is whipped (20-21) and a man who, after being spotted on a different plantation, is murdered by the slaveholder with impunity (38). The fear invoked by these punishments works in concert with the constant threat of getting caught by “[a]ny one having a white face” (88) and turns the plantation into a segmented space fraught with seemingly inviolable boundaries.

Rest and resistance were accessible to Douglass only on the forested outskirts of the plantation, which were more loosely surveilled than the center. On the one hand, this is quite simply because trees make observation difficult (Randle 113). On the other hand, the distance to the big house and secret paths enabled the slaves to interact, reflect and rest without being watched (Vlach 231; Finseth 247). The *Narrative* renders this privacy essential to Douglass’s rebellion against Covey, because the woods enable the former to escape undetected (74). They also provide him with rest and function as a place to meet Sandy Jenkins (76). Therefore, the woods become an in-between place: neither inside the strict surveillance of the plantation circle, nor outside of it. They prove that the gaze of the masters and overseers, while creating a clearly demarcated plantation space, is not totalitarian in a literal sense.

However, overt observation is only one of the surveillance methods employed in and around the plantation. Douglass is also confronted with much more subtle techniques, for example, with the spies that “[t]he slaveholders have been known to send in [...] among their slaves, to ascertain their views and feelings in regard to their condition. [...] If they [the slaves] have anything to say of their masters, it is generally in their masters’ favor” (32). The slaves know they are being observed, but they do not know when and by whom. Accordingly, they internalize “the maxim [...] that a still tongue makes a wise head” (32) even when no actual spies are around, which means

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discussion of plantation surveillance, the *desire* on the part of the slaveholders to watch their slaves should not be disregarded.

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that—in theory—the slaveholder can regulate the speech of his slaves wherever they are.

The power structures imposed on Douglass manifest themselves not only in his verbal expression but also in the direction of his gaze. During the first meeting with his new mistress, he realizes with surprise that “she did not deem it impudent or unmannerly for a slave to look her in the face” (44). This utterance is explained by the fact that there was a “protocol [...] in the colonial South governing how and when, or whether, blacks could look at others” (Bontemps 12). Surveillance always means a gain of power on the part of the watcher. In contrast, not being able to watch or look in the presence of others is both a practical and a symbolic degradation. It constricts the slaves’ field of vision and denies them the opportunity to return the slaveholder’s gaze, while at the same time depriving them of their autonomy and confidence. It is certainly not an accident that Douglass learns to transcend his position as a slave through literacy at the same time he is allowed to ‘look up.’

The regulation of both speech and gaze contributes to one of the goals of plantation surveillance: the denial of Douglass’s and the other slaves’ subjectivity and identity. On a practical level, this process becomes problematic for the slaveholders. How can the uniform mass of slave labor be identified once it has to leave the confines of the plantation circle, or worse, when one of the slaves should try to escape? The *Narrative* indicates the slaveholders’ solution when Douglass describes how he writes “several protections” for him and his confidantes which are meant to convince patrols of the slave’s permission to leave the plantation (88).<sup>3</sup> These slave passes were required of every slave who was found outside the limits of his plantation. Parenti writes about their importance: “The pass and the racially defined contours of (white) literacy and ([b]lack) illiteracy upon which it relied, acted as the slaveocracy’s information technology and infrastructure of routine surveillance” (18). Douglass invests his literacy with the utmost importance, because by negating said binarism, it allows him to become one of the “quill-pen hackers” (Parenti 21) and enables him to escape.

The slave pass system could only work with a network of dedicated controllers. These slave patrols were such a threatening image to Douglass that he hesitated to even plan an escape and mentally projected all the obstacles he could be confronted with outside of the plantation: “At every gate through which we were to pass, we saw a watchman—at every ferry a guard—on every bridge a sentinel—and in every wood a patrol” (87). The totality of his hyperbole evokes the comprehensiveness of the

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3 Interestingly enough, Douglass’s first forgery might not have helped him at all, since slave patrols tended to mistrust general passes without a specific time or date of return (Hadden 112).

surveillance system on the plantation. Moreover, it portrays the slave patrols as an extension of plantation space outside the plantation boundaries, which is another example for the way surveillance can produce space. Slave patrols were not only an obstacle to escape; they also frequently invaded the 'personal' space of the slaves in search of weapons and even conducted covert surveillance around the plantation, at times hiding in bushes (Hadden 106, 114). They were thus another instrument to draw mental and physical lines around the plantation and to grant as little privacy to the slaves as possible, which is registered in Douglass's narration.

### **Panoptic Surveillance**

The variety of surveillance techniques discussed so far indicates that bodily presence was not always necessary to structure the inside and outside of the plantation. The boundaries functioned so well because they were often deeply ingrained in the psyche of the slaves. Douglass's treatment of this process of internalization has garnered considerable scholarly attention and sparked an effort to reexamine his autobiography using Foucault's theories on Bentham's concept of the Panopticon (Axelrod and Axelrod; Nielsen; Jarenski 78; Tuhkanen 96-97; Henderson 2-3). In my following discussion of this connection, I draw mainly on the work of Axelrod and Axelrod as well as Nielsen in order to gain a better understanding of the implications of surveillance for both the structure of plantation space and the mobility of slaves therein.

Depending on the personnel and the geographical characteristics of the plantation, complete and permanent surveillance of the slaves was sometimes neither possible nor efficient. One of Douglass' slaveholders, Mr. Covey, disciplines the slaves as follows:

His work went on in his absence almost as well as in his presence; and he had the faculty of making us feel that he was ever present with us. This he did by surprising us. He seldom approached the spot where we were at work openly, if he could do it secretly. He always aimed at taking us by surprise. Such was his cunning, that we used to call him, among ourselves, "the snake." When we were at work in the cornfield, he would sometimes crawl on his hands and knees to avoid detection, and all at once he would rise nearly in our midst and scream out, "Ha, ha! Come, come! Dash on, dash on!" This being his mode of attack, it was never safe to stop a single minute. His comings were like a thief in the night. He appeared to us to be ever at hand. He was under every tree, behind every stump, in every bush, and at every window, on the plantation. (69)

The quadripartite hyperbole at the end of the passage resembles the one mentioned earlier in Douglass's thoughts about the slave patrols, and it has the same effect: It

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illustrates the feeling of paranoia and anxiety that overcomes Douglass and his fellow slaves and makes them work just as hard and diligently when they are unsupervised as when Covey is near them. Somehow, he seems to have transcended physical space and negated the dichotomy of presence and absence. How does Covey manage to achieve this? Firstly, the slaves appear to be on an open field; otherwise, he could not hide behind stumps, bushes, windows or “fence-corners” (70) and be able to watch them. These objects seem to surround the place of slave labor in a way that allows him to observe the slaves—or, more precisely—the slaves are constantly visible. Secondly, Covey himself is not visible to the slaves (Axelrod and Axelrod 119-20). Douglass combines biblical allusions (the snake, the thief in the night) with words such as “deceiving,” “secretly,” “surprise,” and “cunning” to express and judge Covey’s nonvisibility (69). The slaves only become aware of Covey’s presence when he chooses to show himself and to discipline them, either with words, or, as Douglass frequently experiences, with the whip (69). The paranoia and Covey’s ‘presence-in-absence’ derive from the very fact that the slaves can never be sure whether they are being watched and are unable to return his gaze (Nielsen 255). It is unknown whether Douglass has actually read the writings of English utilitarian philosopher Jeremy Bentham, but in describing Covey’s surveillance, he has outlined the functional principle of Bentham’s Panopticon (Nielsen 254).

Bentham conceived the Panopticon in 1787 as an architectural model for prisons, hospitals, schools, and other public institutions. It comprises a circular building which has a tower at the center. The tower is surrounded by rows and columns of cells (or rooms, depending on the function) facing toward the inspection room at the top of the tower. The windows of this room are covered by venetian blinds, which allow the inspector to watch the cells and prohibits the cellmates from watching the inspector. Hence, the central purpose was “seeing without being seen” (Bentham 29). In *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*, Michel Foucault goes on to use the Panopticon as a metaphor for the modern society of discipline. He argues that panopticism renders power visible but unverifiable, and thus present and absent at the same time. The use of power becomes more efficient as the number of watchers decreases and the number of the watched increases. Furthermore, the need for physical contact is reduced “[b]ecause [...] without any physical instrument other than architecture and geometry, it acts directly on individuals, it gives ‘power of mind over mind’” (Foucault 206). The structure and implications of power need no longer be imposed directly—the panoptic gaze becomes internalized.

Douglass is not the only one to note the significance of the Panopticon for plantation surveillance and architecture. Many slaveholders seem to have had the structure in mind as they planned the layout of their plantations. They connected

architecture with surveillance because “buildings mold behavior; therefore, bodies in space become the medium through which the struggle for control takes place” (Randle 105). The central buildings of plantations were often erected at “key points in the landscape” (Friedman) from which the places of slave labor could be overseen. Either the slaveholder’s mansion or the overseer’s house featured an elevated veranda or windows that were used for surveillance and had the exact effect Bentham envisioned: seeing without being seen (Delle 152). Two concessions have to be made here. Firstly, Bentham saw the Panopticon as a humane and progressive model of discipline that featured as little physical violence as necessary, which was of course not true for slave plantations. Panopticism can thus only be seen as a contributing factor to the “geography of power” of plantation space (Randle 105), not its main organizing principle. Secondly, Foucault’s metaphor has undergone numerous critical revisions since its conception. It is featured here because it can shed light on the relation of surveillance and space in the *Narrative*, not vice versa.

Douglass describes the effects of Covey’s panoptic surveillance both in spatial and psychological terms. The former is the already mentioned omnipresence of the watcher—the whole plantation space seems to be subject to his exercise of power and discipline. This has an impact on Douglass’s conception of himself as an individual:

My natural elasticity was crushed, my intellect languished, the disposition to read departed, the cheerful spark that lingered about my eye died; the dark night of slavery closed in upon me, and behold a man transformed into a brute. (71)

Interestingly, Douglass uses a spatial metaphor—“closed in”—when writing about the constricting and dehumanizing consequences of not only the never-ending labor and physical punishments but also Covey’s tendency for deception. The metaphor evokes inevitability: Douglass is unable to resist—he has, literally, no way out—because he “internalized [...] his own powerlessness” (Axelrod and Axelrod 121). Douglass underlines the effects of panopticism by contrasting Covey with Mr. Freeland, whom he praises for being “open and frank” (81). The slaves “always knew where to find him” (81). The possibility of locating and seeing the slaveholder enables counter-surveillance on the part of Douglass and the slaves, which in turn destroys the power differential of the Panopticon and rids space of the extreme anxiety produced by Covey.

Douglass’s narration emphasizes the efficiency of panoptic surveillance and showcases its application on the plantation. He portrays Covey’s technique as emblematic for a regime of slavery that relies on the advantage of controlling brutes, rather than autonomous human beings. Consequently, the space produced by this surveillance has clear boundaries and rules which are inscribed into Douglass’s mind



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and body. However, once he travels to the city, the tables turn and it is he who inscribes the space, which has profound implications both for his identity and for the rhetorical aim of his narrative.

### **Opening the Gateway: City Space and Surveillance**

Douglass’ spatial transition from the plantation to the city of Baltimore is also a fitting transition between sections two and three of this paper, since his descriptions illuminate the interplay of surveillance and space, while, at the same time, demonstrating his conversion of space into a metaphor. The city space necessitates different surveillance methods than the plantation, which in turn influence how Douglass perceives and negotiates his surroundings. Closed and open spaces, as well as privacy and observation, again play major roles in the construction of his identity. Or, to be more precise: Douglass is only able to construct his own identity because he has access to knowledge, and he uses the city space with its permeable borders—in contrast to the plantation—as a metaphor for this process.

Even though Douglass is positively surprised when he first travels to Baltimore and meets his new master and mistress—as evidenced by the freedom of his gaze—it does not take long until he registers the corrupting effects of slavery. Similar to the tar that surrounds Colonel Lloyd’s garden and defiles the slaves, the Aulds’ power over Douglass and their subsequent wish to preserve it lead them to suppress his desire to learn and make them place him under “[narrow]” surveillance (49). Douglass describes this change as a fall from the heavenly state of humanity—“angelic”—to the monstrous depths of sin—“demon” (45)—a fall that is exemplified by the treatment Henrietta and Mary receive from Mrs. Hamilton, who starves and whips them (47). The city is therefore by no means a space without repressive power structures or physical discipline. Still, Douglass contrasts city space with the plantation on many occasions, specifically when it comes to surveillance methods and their dependence on the city’s spatial characteristics.

Douglass’s ability to look at his new masters in the city transforms him from a mere object of their gaze to a subject capable of watching himself—in both senses of the expression. What has far greater implications, however, is the fact that his masters find themselves in a social network of gazes and are also subject to the coercion this system entails. While, to Douglass, the owners of the plantation seem to usurp the place of God as the unwatched watcher, the slaveholders in the city base their decisions on the implied observation of others: “He is a desperate slaveholder, who will shock the humanity of his nonslaveholding neighbors with the cries of his

lacerated slave” (46). The mere vicinity of whites without slaves appears to establish a “vestige of decency” (46). The decency was noncommittal and in no sense permanent, but it introduces a variable in the master/slave relationship that helps Douglass in his future struggle with Covey. It also leads to a “marked difference [...] in the treatment of slaves” (46), which extends from the way they are fed to an increase in their amount of safety, privacy and mobility.

These changes are not only subject to the social dimension of city space but also to its architectural and economical structure. The existence of “separate room[s]” (49) in the house alone creates a space where Douglass can be by himself and unobserved, a state which, on the plantation, was only accessible in the woods on the periphery. His masters realize the dangers of this privacy particularly after they suspect him of attempting to become literate and try to restrict the time he spends alone (49). The house itself provides a space surrounded by walls, which means on the one hand that slaveholders can discipline their slaves in secret—as Douglass shows with Henrietta and Mary—but, on the other hand, allows the slave to escape the direct gaze of their masters when *outside* the house. Since many slaveholders in the city used their slaves to run errands, the latter could move around the city as free and unobserved as other whites on the street allowed them to. Douglass enjoys the same privilege as he writes about visits to Mr. Hamilton’s house (47), the shipyard (53) and the streets of Baltimore in general (49).

For Douglass, the consequence of this mobility is twofold: It furnishes him with a social identity and creates a spatial privacy that eventually allows him to become literate. On his errands, Douglass meets and interacts with a variety of people, among them street urchins (49) and Irish sailors (52). His communication with the latter is another example of his internalization of the panoptic gaze: “I pretended not to be interested in what they said, and treated them as I if I did not understand them; for I feared they might be treacherous” (52-53). Nevertheless, their information strengthens his resolve to escape. The urchins are even more important, however, in that they present an opportunity for human interaction outside the power structure of slavery. Douglass can talk openly to them and, for the first time in the *Narrative*, exists externally as a truly social human being. Their input, which helps him to learn how to read, is only accessible because Douglass can move through the city space unobserved. Moreover, the fact that he has free time, mobility and privacy allows him to learn how to write by observing the carpenters (53) and copying letters in the safety of his masters’ abandoned house (53-54). This relation between literacy and city space—terms which metaphorically stand for freedom and privacy, respectively—culminates in one of the central images of the *Narrative*: “During this time, my copy-book was the board fence, brick wall and pavement; my pen and ink was a lump of chalk” (53).

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Although Douglass means this quite literally, his words, as they so often do throughout the *Narrative*, take on a metaphorical meaning: The very space of Baltimore, as opposed to the plantation with its impenetrable barriers and panoptic surveillance, makes it possible for him to escape the gaze of his masters momentarily and become something other than a mere slave—a reader.

### **LOCATING THE INTERSECTION OF SPACE, SURVEILLANCE, AND IDENTITY IN THE *NARRATIVE***

#### **Lotmann’s Theory of Literary Space**

So far, my analysis has shown how Douglass portrays the impact of surveillance on his life as a slave, especially in regard to its production of space. But how can this interplay of surveillance and space contribute to an interpretation of the *Narrative* in a cultural context, let alone help to understand the rhetorical importance of his autobiography? In trying to answer this question, I will first turn to the theories of the Russian structuralist and semiotician Jurij Lotmann, who is regarded as one of the major influences in translating the implications of the ‘spatial turn’ from cultural studies to literary studies. In *Die Struktur literarischer Texte*, Lotmann begins his discussion of aesthetic space with the assertion that space is not only a general category of human perception, but, more abstractly, a system of objects which are connected by relations that resemble spatial relations (312). This allows for “the possibility of portraying inherently nonspatial terms with spatial models” (“die Möglichkeit der Darstellung von Begriffen, die an sich nicht räumlicher Natur sind, in räumlichen Modellen”; 313), and the language of spatial relations becomes thus a “fundamental means for interpreting reality” (“[grundlegendes] Mittel zur Deutung der Wirklichkeit”; 313).<sup>4</sup> Lotmann supports this statement with the fact that spatial binarisms—high/low—are often allegorically connected to nonspatial binarisms—good/bad—and accordingly serve as linguistic means to construct cultural models (313).

A very important binarism for the literary text is open/closed, which is characterized by the spatial image of the boundary—“Grenze.” “The boundary divides the space into two disjunctive subspaces. Its most important property is its inviolability.” (“Die Grenze teilt den Raum in zwei disjunkte Teilräume. Ihre wichtigste

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4 Hallet, Lotmann, and Neumann were consulted in German. English translations by the author.

Eigenschaft ist ihre Unüberschreitbarkeit"; 327). Lotmann relies on Saussure's theory of the linguistic sign, according to which the signifier derives its meaning solely from its difference to other signifiers. Similarly, a text remains static until one character is able to cross the boundary between two separate semantic fields. This act then initiates the plot: The character creates an "action space" ("Aktionsraum"; Hallet 17) by traversing a binary opposition.

The boundary and its traversal need not necessarily be geographical, as Lotmann establishes. By questioning the fixity of spatial binarisms and their metaphorical associations, the crossing of a border contains a "revolutionary element" ("revolutionäres Element"), and the "transgressions of culturally established and accepted boundaries enacted in literature always also coincide with a questioning of historically predetermined systems of meaning." ("Die in der Literatur inszenierten Überschreitungen kulturell etablierter und akzeptierter Grenzen gehen immer auch einher mit einer Infragestellung historisch gegebener Sinnsysteme"; Hallet 18). Interestingly enough, Lotmann's image of the boundary resurfaces in theories of colonial literature:

Colonial literature predominantly operates with binary models of space in order to hypostatize seemingly unambiguous boundaries between the self and the Other and to enact essential notions of culture or collective identity. The space is often separated into 'two disjunctive subspaces' by contrastive semanticizations of space.

Die koloniale Literatur operiert vor allem mit binären Raummodellen, um vermeintlich eindeutige Grenzen zwischen Eigenem und Fremden zu hypostasieren und essentielle Vorstellungen von Kultur bzw. Kollektividentität zu inszenieren. Nicht selten kommen dabei kontrastive Raumsemantisierungen zum Einsatz, die den Raum 'in zwei disjunkte Teilräume' (Lotmann 1972: 327) gliedern [...]. (Neumann 125)

In the next sections, I will show how these seemingly unambiguous and essential boundaries are traced in Douglass's *Narrative*, and how he not only crosses them but also ultimately demonstrates their contingency.

### **Crossing Boundaries**

The spatial binarisms mentioned by Lotmann have frequently appeared throughout this analysis of the *Narrative*: Slavery and freedom are compared to down and up, South and North, narrowness and vastness; there is an inside and an outside to the circle of the plantation. Similarly, the space of Douglass's narrative is divided into different semantic fields that correspond to these categories, and his movement

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between these different fields advances the plot, a fact his autobiography shares with many other slave narratives: “[The] unifying narrative structure of the genre involves the movement of a human being from place to place: from plantation to swamp, from town to town, from South to North” (Finseth 238). The spatial boundaries for Douglass run along the same lines. Firstly, there is an inside and an outside to the plantation, a boundary which he crosses when he flees to Sandy Jenkins. Secondly, there is a boundary between the city and the plantation, which he crosses twice: from General Lloyd’s plantation to Baltimore and then to Covey. Finally, and most importantly, there is the boundary between the “prison-house of bondage” (Douglass 3) in the South and the “clean, new and beautiful” North (110), a binarism also quite regularly encountered in slave narratives (Finseth 251).

What all these spatial boundaries have in common is that they are not of a geographical or physical nature: If Douglass were physically capable of crossing the swamps and rivers around the plantation or travel to the North—which he certainly was—then he could have done just that. Instead, these boundaries are created by the surveillance of his masters and the political institutions of the South. Douglass has to brave slave passes, slave patrols, wanted posters, overseers, and the panoptic surveillance inscribed in his body. Space and surveillance thus structure the whole *Narrative* as Douglass crosses internalized boundaries that are drawn by the watchful gaze of his masters. The action space created by his progress makes his journey from slavery to freedom possible.

However, Lotmann’s theory of literary space goes further: According to him, nonspatial concepts can be expressed through spatial terms, which is exactly what happens in the *Narrative*. Douglass’s move from the closed space of the plantation to the comparatively more open space of Baltimore furnishes him with a social identity. Having gained a modicum of privacy, he demonstrates that he is capable of reading, writing, and accumulating knowledge. He realizes that there is no essential or natural disposition for whites to be masters and blacks to be slaves, and that he—de facto but not de jure—has the right to judge his masters morally as an equal (Gibson 567). Therefore, he crosses a metaphorical boundary between the semantic fields described by Kawash as “chattel personal” and “person” (23). The fact that a black person *is able* to cross this line in the first place was by no means self-evident among Douglass’s contemporary readers. His crossing of the spatial boundary coincides with the formation of his identity, and thus the boundary is invested with metaphorical meaning. The same interrelation can be observed when Douglass escapes from the South to the North and crosses the boundary between the semantic fields of ‘slave’ and ‘free, property owning male.’

Lotmann further complicates the neat subdivision of the text into two semantic fields. Boundaries do not have to be static: They can change the distribution and makeup of spaces according to their association with different perspectives of characters (Lotmann 328). However, this “polyphony of spaces” (329) does not account for the complete disappearance of a boundary. Simply stating that Douglass crosses boundaries drawn by surveillance would not go far enough, since the *Narrative* intends to do away with the privileged binarisms fueling the regime of slavery. By accumulating knowledge through reading and reflection, Douglass realizes why and how these spatial and metaphorical boundaries between semantic fields—for example, nonperson/person—are constructed and thus shows their contingency. The next section will demonstrate this process by analyzing his use of the rhetoric of his masters and his depiction of the fight with Covey.

### **Transcending Boundaries**

Douglass’s traversal of the boundaries drawn by his masters has both a diachronic dimension—following the course of plot development over time—and a synchronic dimension—persuading his readers rhetorically throughout the text. The former begins with his accumulation of knowledge about the institution of slavery and culminates in his fight against Covey. From the beginning of the *Narrative*, Douglass’ spatial metaphors characterize slavery not as static and unchangeable, but as liminal and temporary: It is “the hell of slavery, through which I was about to pass” (21) and it has a “gateway” (42) that opens when he comes to Baltimore. However, these are retrospects. When Douglass describes his past point of view, his escape seems much more improbable to him. Slavery is described as a “horrible pit” with “no ladder upon which to get out” (51). Gradually, over the course of the *Narrative*, Douglass finds ways of resistance, the most important of which is his literacy. I have already demonstrated how this “pathway” (45) enabled Douglass to recognize his status as an equal and led to a permanent change of his self-perception. “Freedom,” he writes, “now appeared, to disappear no more forever” (51), and this realization plays a major part both in his staging of the battle with Covey and in his subsequent crossing of the boundary between “the tomb of slavery” and “the heaven of freedom” (78).

Before the battle even begins, Douglass draws on two important strategies of resistance. He withdraws into the woods “to avoid detection” (74) and thus escapes the direct surveillance temporarily. He also interacts with another human being, Sandy Jenkins, who helps him in the privacy of his home. The mysterious root Douglass acquires could be seen as a symbol for this privacy and autonomy. Whether it directly helps him in his confrontation with Covey or not is debatable, but *something* drives

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Douglass to physically resist the overseer, something that not even Douglass himself can name. This marks the first time in the *Narrative* that the seemingly total domination of surveillance fails to account for the unpredictability of the watched and simply collapses. Axelrod and Axelrod explain this crucial turning point with the fact that Covey becomes too sure of the boundaries he has drawn and forgets that beyond his interiorization of powerlessness, Douglass is still a human being and poses a threat to him (123). Axelrod and Axelrod also point out that Covey does not retaliate because, suddenly, he has become visible to the slaveholding community, which could question his reputation as a slave breaker if they heard of the incident (125).

By connecting his victory over Covey with the assertion that he will no longer be “a slave in fact” but only “a slave in form” (78), Douglass again underlines the importance of knowledge: Slavery is a power relation imposed on him by other men, not an essential characteristic that defines himself. As soon as he understands the workings of Covey’s surveillance and realizes their limits, he is able to use these limits against his master. Douglass’s literacy aids him in this undertaking because, as he mentions, it instils him with a yearning for freedom and subjectivity that cannot be stifled by the effects of surveillance and discipline. Consequently, Douglass is no longer subjected to his master’s gaze, but is a subject of his own will. The boundary between master and slave is rendered contingent, which lays the foundation for Douglass’s escape to the North.

Another boundary rhetorically deconstructed by Douglass is the one between the privileged white subject and the subordinate black chattel. At several points throughout the narrative, Douglass mentions that slaveholders employ Christian religion as a justification for both the essential boundaries between whites and blacks as well as the right of the former to enslave the latter. His most scathing indictment of this practice is built on another spatial metaphor: “[T]he religion of the south is a mere covering for the most horrid crimes, [...] a dark shelter under, which the darkest, foulest, grossest and most infernal deeds of slaveholders find the strongest protection” (82). His masters use bible verses as justifications for whippings (64), punish their slaves under the public guise of piety (83), and forbid the slaves from studying the bible themselves (64). Douglass condemns his masters’ religious fervor as hypocritical by using the terms of their discourse: Mr. Severe turns the field of slave labor into a “field of blood and of blasphemy” (25), which is an allusion to the “field of blood” (Matt. 27.8) where Judas was buried. The overseer is thus aligned with the most traitorous character of the bible. Covey is called “the snake” and his comings are like “a thief in the night,” (69) which alludes to a bible verse about the final judgment (1 Thess. 5.2). Moreover, Colonel Lloyd’s garden is a Christian metaphor for the detrimental effects of slavery, as he ‘shuts them out of paradise.’ In so turning the masters’ own vocabulary against

them, Douglass demonstrates their hubris: By sitting at the center of the plantation, overseeing “every motion of the slaves” (69) from the great house farm, watching, controlling, and judging the slaves, the slaveholders themselves take up the place of God.

This image brings together the various spatial and metaphorical aspects of the boundaries described so far. Referring back to Lotmann, we see that the masters and overseers take up a privileged position, which is connected to a spatial hierarchy with metaphorical meaning—they are above, and the slaves are below. They draw boundaries and divide the plantation into closed and open spaces, with clear regulations for the movement of the slaves. In his discussion of the Russian poet Zabolotsky, Lotmann defines “completely determined movement” (“vollständig determinierte Bewegung”) as slavery and the “possibility of the unpredictable” (“Möglichkeit des Unvorhersagbaren”) as freedom (320). Since the slaveholders are not Gods, they cannot predict Douglass’s movements and intentions with certainty. Their gaze fails to define him, and by escaping their surveillance with a human identity and judging them as his equal, Douglass wipes away the metaphorical boundary that justifies the regime of slavery by demonstrating the “unpredictable” potential of the black subject to the America of his time.

## **CONCLUSION**

Why did Douglass “see and hear” (27) differently while he was within the circle? We have seen that the surveillance on the plantation did not stop at regulating his mobility, his gaze and his words—it also reached deeply into his psyche, ingraining regulations which needed no constant observation in order to be obeyed. The *Narrative* is thus an early testament to both the scope and the power of the social practice of surveillance. The combination of physical punishment and a tight network of watchers allowed the slaveholders to extract work from men and women, who internalized their own powerlessness.

Douglass’s emphasis on spatial metaphors and the description of his surroundings make it comprehensible how deeply intertwined space and surveillance are for him: The weave of gazes determines his mobility and draws permanent boundaries, protected by violent force. These spatial boundaries structure the *Narrative*, and Douglass invests them with metaphorical meaning for “those without” (27) the circle, inviting them to question and recontextualize the ideological boundaries between whiteness/blackness and “chattel personal”/“person” (Kawash 23).



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The mere fact that Douglass turned his memories into literature is metafictional evidence for the contingency of these boundaries. It also shows that, quite simply, knowledge is power. Douglass not only needs literacy to convince himself and others that slaves are human beings, he also needs it to form and retain his autonomous identity. The realization of the latter is what the surveillance of the slaveholders tried to avoid, and Covey’s panoptic surveillance serves as an example. Thus, the *Narrative* ultimately questions the totality of the white gaze and its power to define what is human and what is not. Even though Lloyd, the Aulds, Covey, and Freeman watch Douglass for a long time, they cannot thwart his escape and are now exposed to the judging gaze of Douglass and his readers.

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