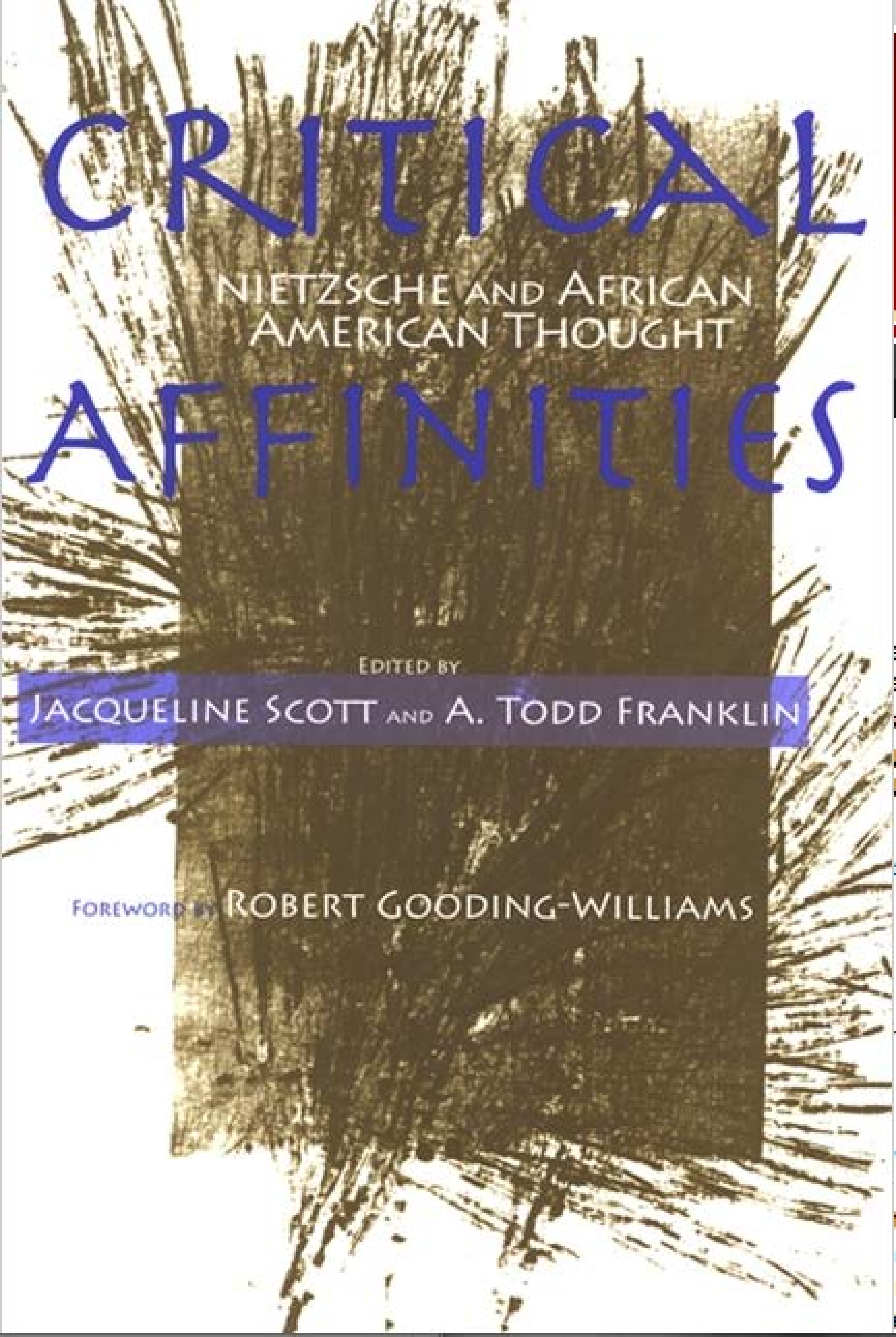

CRITICAL AFFINITIES

NIETZSCHE AND AFRICAN AMERICAN THOUGHT

EDITED BY
JACQUELINE SCOTT AND A. TODD FRANKLIN

FOREWORD BY ROBERT GOODING-WILLIAMS

PHILOSOPHY / AFRICAN AMERICAN STUDIES

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JACQUELINE SCOTT AND A. TODD FRANKLIN, EDITORS
FOREWORD BY ROBERT GOODING-WILLIAMS

Critical Affinities is the first book to explore the multifaceted relationship between the philosophy of Friedrich Nietzsche and various dimensions of African American thought. Exploring the connections between these two unlikely interlocutors, the contributors focus on unmasking and understanding the root causes and racially inflected symptoms of various manifestations of cultural malaise. They contemplate the operative warrant for reconstituted conceptions of racial identity and recognize the existential and social recuperative potential of the will to power. In so doing, they simultaneously foster and exemplify a nuanced understanding of what both traditions regard as "the art of the cultural physician." The contributors connote daring scholarly attempts to explicate the ways in which clarifying the critical affinities between Nietzsche and various expressions of African American thought not only enriches our understanding of each, but also enhances our ability to realize the broader ends of advancing the prospects for social and psychological flourishing.

"These essays complicate and perhaps disrupt common notions of the discursive options available to black studies. Rather than promote an afrocentric, diasporic, queered, or feminist black studies, they tacitly envision a black studies charmed and unsettled by a seducer, by Nietzsche—a black studies richer in itself, newer to itself than before, full of new will and currents, full of new dissatisfactions." — from the Foreword by Robert Gooding-Williams

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A volume in the SUNY series, Philosophy and Race
Robert Bernasconi and T. Denean Sharpley-Whiting, editors

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Foreword: Supposing Nietzsche to Be Black—What Then?

ROBERT GOODING-WILLIAMS

The chapters here mark the advent of a new, new Nietzsche, a convergence of recurrence and singularity. They present not a German Nietzsche, a French Nietzsche, or an Anglo-American Nietzsche, but an African American Nietzsche, a black Nietzsche. Supposing Nietzsche to be black—what then? To suppose Nietzsche to be black is to suppose, with the editors of this anthology, that he may be interpreted with an eye to the typical concerns of African American thought; or, more generally, the typical concerns of black studies. If Nietzsche becomes French when read in the perspective of poststructuralism, or Anglo-American when read in the perspective of contemporary analytic philosophy, then he becomes black when read in the perspective of black studies.[1]

Consider too that these chapters complicate and perhaps disrupt common notions of the discursive options available to black studies. Rather than promote an Afrocentric, diasporic, queer, or feminist black studies (and here I make no judgment as to the comparative merits of these now-familiar approaches to the discipline), they tacitly envision a black studies charmed and unsettled by a seducer (*ein Versucher*), by Nietzsche—a black studies richer in itself, newer to itself than before, full of new will and currents, full of new dissatisfactions.[2] In Jacqueline Scott's and A. Todd Franklin's enticing volume of Nietzsche scholarship, a black new Nietzsche inspires new thoughts about black thought and black studies.

But we should not proceed too hastily. While new and still- newer Nietzsches continue to thrive, spectres of older Nietzsches remain,

8

Unlikely Illuminations: Nietzsche and Frederick Douglass on Power, Struggle, and the *Aisthesis* of Freedom

CHRISTA DAVIS ACAMPORA

This chapter strives to illuminate affinities between Frederick Douglass's conception of freedom and the slavery he escaped and Nietzsche's view of struggle, which indicates a similar conception of the dynamic of perversions of power and its transfiguring possibilities. The two complement each other in unexpected ways. Douglass provides accounts of slave experience that illustrate how his resistance through struggle offered him a transformative aesthetic experience of *meaningful* freedom. This realization of power is specifically one not motivated by revenge and resentment of the sort Nietzsche describes as characteristic of slavish morality in the first essay of his *On the Genealogy of Morals*. Much of Nietzsche's writing aims at investigating how meanings or values are produced, and especially the ways in which their genealogies are marked by efforts to effect *sensations of power*. Nietzsche provides some relevant criteria for distinguishing creative from destructive struggles, the kinds of transformations they effect, and the forms of power they afford and cultivate. This Nietzschean framework supports Douglass's impression that he has a superior character when emerging out of struggles that enable him to gain a sense of his freedom.

To some, my objective here might seem perverse, perhaps even repulsive—why endeavor to bend Douglass to Nietzsche, or attempt to read Nietzsche as if he were a progressive egalitarian? After all, does not one powerfully articulate the moral reprehensibility of slavery while the other is a philosopher of mastery and domination who actually advocates a new kind of slavery[1] and is perhaps even "a cruel racist"[2] through and through? What is to be gained by performing the hermeneutic gymnastics required to illuminate any similarity between these two writers, and would not doing so constitute an injustice to the intent of each?[3] I am quite mindful of these concerns, although the confines of this chapter do not permit me to thoroughly address all of them. Ultimately, I argue that both Douglass and Nietzsche share a conception of human power and how it might seek or produce meaningful freedom. The purpose is not to show that they ultimately share the same ends in their projects but rather that they hold certain complementary positions that, when considered in tandem, deepen our appreciation of the respective projects in which they were involved. The goal of reading Nietzsche alongside Douglass is not to render Nietzsche more palatable or to offer his apology against the charges of racism, as if by mere association with Douglass Nietzsche appears more sympathetic to the concerns of oppressed blacks. Nor is it my objective to show that what Douglass can merely express as his personal experience in narrative form Nietzsche actually renders more truly philosophical. I am not trying to give Nietzsche the face of Douglass or see the specter of Nietzsche illuminating Douglass's experience. Instead, the real work of this chapter is to further explore the relevance of imagination for moral deliberation (broadly conceived to include consideration of the sort of person one aims to become). Reading Douglass and Nietzsche together on power as it relates to the felt quality or *aisthesis* of freedom provides entrée to further investigation of practices of resistance and the relation between aesthetic and moral freedom. Attentive to these *unlikely illuminations*, we can better appreciate ways in which the acquisition of meaningful freedom is an accomplishment achieved through a dynamic of social and individual cooperation and resistance that is not necessarily hostile to the pursuit of meaningful community. In fact, I draw an even stronger conclusion—far from destroying or minimizing the significance of our relations to others, the *aisthesis* of agency, realized in struggle, educes erotic and imaginative resources vital for shaping a collective identity of who we are and the future we want as ours.

I.

Douglass's oft-cited account of his fight with the slave-breaker Covey in his second autobiography, *My Bondage and My Freedom*,[4] clearly indicates that despite the tortures of slavery, Douglass longed not to simply reverse the terms of his subjugation in order to brutalize his captors. Douglass cites his resistance to Covey as the ignition of his struggle for freedom. A striking feature of Douglass's account is the way in which he perceives the use of power and the value of struggle. He is careful to distinguish his defensive from his aggressive acts, and these distinctions have less to do with an interest in being a good Christian than they do with his concern to not exert force abusively. Douglass's descriptions of his experience distinguish his passionate desire to develop as a mature human being from a ruthless, nearly desperate urge to secure recognition of one's superiority by any means necessary. Douglass, no doubt, seeks recognition, but he pursues his quest in a way that specifically avoids abuse and cruelty. Sheer dominance clearly does not constitute legitimacy in his eyes. In fact, Douglass suggests that those who are compelled to *destroy* others as a means of expressing their desire to assert themselves fail to create the communities within which their honor might genuinely have any worth.

One day, as Douglass is tending the horses in the stables, Covey sneaks, "in a peculiar snake-like way," into the barn and tackles him unawares. Covey attempts to tie Douglass's legs so that he can beat him with less resistance. Although weakened from a beating that had, only days before, injured him so severely that he nearly lost his life, Douglass still manages to successfully prevent being bound. Douglass notes that it seemed as though Covey thought he had him "very securely within his power," when he "resolved to fight": "The fighting madness had come upon me, and I found my strong fingers firmly attached to the throat of my cowardly tormentor; as heedless of consequences, at the moment, as though we stood as equals before the law" (*MB*, 242). Douglass at once broke loose of the belief, inculcated from his birth, that the "masters are superior, and invested with a sort of sacredness" that could not be challenged (*MB*, 251). Douglass describes how he met every blow Covey attempted to make, but that he did not strive to injure him in return. Surprised by the resistance of the slave he had so thoroughly abused just two days earlier, Covey began to tremble. Prior to this time, Douglass claims, the contest had been equal, but Covey could not stand to engage in such a fight. Covey "lustily" cried out for help, Douglass recalls, "not that I was obtaining any marked advantage over him, or was injuring him, but because he was gaining none over me, and was not able, single-handed, to conquer me" (*MB*, 243). Soon enough Covey secured the help he needed, and Douglass was forced to meet the disruption of the balance of power with greater force. He writes, "I was still *defensive* toward Covey, but *aggressive* toward [his cousin] Hughes," who had come to his aid (*MB*, 243).

Douglass quickly dispensed with Hughes by kicking him so hard that he swaggered away in pain. Still, his actions toward Covey remained the same. Even when it appeared as though Covey was about to bludgeon him with a piece of wood, Douglass tossed him into a pile of cow manure rather than taking the wood from him in order to use it to beat him. Readers are told that the fight continued for several hours. Covey repeatedly attempted to gain an advantage by enlisting the help of other slaves, but all refused. Finally, Covey gave up the fight, telling Douglass, "I would not have whipped you half so much as I have had you not resisted" (*MB*, 246). But Douglass claims Covey had not whipped him at all, and he never attempted to whip him again.

Earlier in the work Douglass reflects on the nature of the abuses slaveholders perpetrate. He notes that masters choose to beat slaves who do not resist, not necessarily because they are concerned for their own physical well-being, but because their sense of their own self-worth is inextricably linked to their ability to completely dominate others encountered in these matches. In a description of the brutal flogging of a slave named "Nellie," whose only offense was having the courage to look her master in the eye, Douglass notes how the master succeeded in bruising her flesh but left "her invincible spirit undaunted" (*MB*, 94). Consequently, she was almost never beaten again. Douglass writes, "They prefer to whip those who are most easily whipped. The old doctrine that submission is the best cure for outrage and wrong does not hold good on the slave plantation. He is whipped oftenest, who is whipped easiest; and that slave who has the courage to stand up for himself against the overseer, although he may have many hard stripes at first, becomes, in the end, a freeman, even though he sustain the formal relation of a slave" (*MB*, 95).

It is that sense of freedom that Douglass claims for himself following the fight with Covey. It reflects the "turning point" in his "'*life as a slave*'" and "rekindled . . . the smouldering embers of liberty" that had been beaten out of him since his youth. Douglass writes, "I was a changed being after that fight. I was *nothing* before; I WAS A MAN NOW" (*MB*, 246). To be a man[5]—and it would seem from his descriptions of Covey's "breeder," Caroline, to be human—is to have force: what Douglass calls "the essential dignity of humanity" (*MB*, 247). "Human nature," he writes, "is so constituted, that it cannot *honor* a helpless man, although it can *pity* him; and even this it cannot do long, if the signs of power do not arise" (*MB*, 247). But we should take special note of the kind force that Douglass exercised in the aforementioned description above and that with which it is contrasted.

Douglass tells us that "Covey was a tyrant, and a cowardly one, withal." As to why he did not report Douglass to the authorities for breaking the law that forbids resisting a master on the penalty of death, Douglass speculates that "Covey was, probably, ashamed to have it known and confessed that he had been mastered by a boy of sixteen. [. . .] The story that he had undertaken to whip a lad, and had been resisted, was, of itself, sufficient to damage him; for his bearing should, in the estimation of slaveholders, be of that imperial order that should make such an occurrence impossible" (*MB*, 248). Covey was in many respects like one of Douglass's earlier masters, Captain Auld. Douglass describes him as a man in whom there was "all the love of domination, the pride of mastery, and the swagger of authority, but his rule lacked the vital element of consistency." "He could be cruel," Douglass continues, "but his methods of showing it were cowardly, and evinced his meanness rather than his spirit. His commands were strong, his enforcement weak" (*MB*, 192).

Speaking of the force that distinguishes him, Douglass writes, "This spirit made me a freeman in *fact*, while I remained a slave in *form*" (*MB*, 247). Further, he claims, "When a slave cannot be flogged he is more than half free. He has a domain as broad as his own manly heart to defend, and his is really '*a power on earth*'" (*MB*, 247). For Douglass, it is the character of the power he exercises in action that distinguishes the free man from the slave, despite his formal conditions.[6]

What does the fight with Covey give Douglass? He describes it himself as acquiring recognition (*for* himself, not *by* Covey) that he is *not* helpless. But his physical bondage persists, and it is unclear that much changes in the social order following the incident, except that Covey is understandably wary of Douglass and chooses to pursue more pliant subjects for his violent outbursts. The struggle itself obviously did not earn Douglass manumission. It did not result in recognition by his torturer that he had a claim or *entitlement* to freedom. So what was it that gave Douglass the experience of being "a man now, of being" a power on earth"?

According to the prevailing conception of justice, he continued to be a slave; his condition was justified in terms of the institution that secured and enforced his slavery, in terms of the white, masculine model of the rational, autonomous, sovereign individual, coupled with views concerning who was and was not capable of such self-government. That institution simply refused to recognize Douglass as having even the possibility of attaining what was recognized as legitimate human agency. He was considered *essentially* deficient. Cast in those terms, it was impossible to *see* him *ever* as anything more than a slave, property. What enables Douglass to see himself as something *more*?

In the course of the struggle Douglass does more than seize the standards of measure of the master and apply them to himself. In fighting, in the activity of struggling—of transforming the situation and the outcome—Douglass derives a new sense of justice (and not merely a new route to it for himself). This new sense of justice enables him to see himself not as someone with (the right to) dominion but rather *as an agent full of possibilities*. It is *that* which produces the *feeling* of himself as free—this is what I call the *aisthesis* of agency. The *aisthesis* of agency is more than simply a sensation. It is an experience that carries cognitive import—something previously unknown is disclosed, and this opens new possibilities for action and the production of meanings.

It is significant that this experience stems from a physical, bodily encounter[7] rather than from the intellectual or spiritual labors characteristic of the nineteenth-century *Bildungsroman* tradition, among which Douglass's writings might be included but from which they should be distinguished. Meaningful freedom is not just a state of mind for Douglass: it is fully *embodied*; it gives the body new meaning. The occasion of his naissance into freedom was not a contest or game or rite of passage that was abstracted from the ordinary and everyday as in the heroic tradition of ancient Greek literature. What Douglass acquires is not a concept of himself as a person with a claim to *power over* others but rather the feeling of having forged a path to a new domain—one "as broad as his own manly heart," one characterized not by recognition of autonomy or self-control but rather by possibility and the power to imaginatively create a future.

Douglass's fight with Covey provides him entrée to what Drucilla Cornell describes as "the imaginary domain," "that psychic and moral space in which we [. . .] are allowed to evaluate and represent who we are."[8] She considers how such imaginative resources are crucial for the formation of identity and one's capacity for self-representation. The imaginary domain, she writes, is what "gives to the individual person, and her only, the right to claim who she is through her own representation of her [. . .] being."[9] This capacity, Cornell suggests, is what gives real import to our concerns for autonomy, which she conceives not simply as freedom from others but rather as the *power to* be the authors of our lives, to be the *sources* of the lives we live and the ways in which they differ from the lives of others.

A new kind of agency is possible in the imaginary domain, and this is particularly significant for those whose situation is utterly abysmal and lacks options for viable action for change. Cornell writes that "the imaginary domain is the space of the 'as if' in which we imagine who we might be if we made ourselves our own end and claimed ourselves as our own person."[10] In the imaginary domain, we are *free* to imaginatively experience not only possible *objects* of desire but the *kind of desire* (or the *shape of desire*) that will animate our actions and orient our larger goals and projects. When, in the fight with Covey, Douglass feels himself to be "a power on earth" rather than merely an agent who either lacks or possesses superior force, he acquires a different sense of human possibility. In this encounter, the intelligible end of the meaning of human being shifts from being cast only in terms of domination—the completion and perfection of which might be total subjection or even annihilation—to being considered in terms of agency that aims chiefly at becoming a creator of ends and the standards by which they might be judged. He moves, in short, from conceiving the good of human reality as power that is realized in terms of possession to defining that good in terms of possessing the possibility of *reshaping the good itself*. When one is free to be good not merely in terms of values constituted by others but free to participate in the determination of those values oneself, one engages a thoroughly different, and I would argue more powerful, sense of agency than before. As Douglass himself plays a role in defining the terms of his fight with Covey, as he determines for himself what will constitute superior moral character in his resistance, he experiences the felt quality of the imaginary domain in which his freedom positively acquires its significance and meaning. It is an experience that opens a whole new set of possibilities, and it enables him to surmount if not the physical subjection of his body the subjection of his desire that gives that body and all of its actions its meaning and future possibilities. Empowered by *the feeling of his freedom*, Douglass is enabled to imagine innumerable ways in which it might be further realized, which is not to be free of the demands of others.[11]

The kind of freedom exercised in the imaginary domain is called "freedom of personality" by Cornell, which "is valuable because it is what lets us make a life we embrace as our own."[12] This, I take it, is what Douglass means when he claims "Now I AM A MAN," not that the fight has made him *manly* or summoned from him manly qualities, or that previously he was somehow deficient in human being, but rather that he had a palpable experience of the felt quality of himself as an agent full of possibility—to exercise restraint, to resist, to vie for determining the terms of his struggle and what its end should be—and that this was a life he could embrace as his own. It does not represent a discovery of a pre-fabricated autonomous, metaphysical self, and it is not just the building of himself as a "self-made man" who achieves his freedom by ruling himself.[13]

The struggle that marks Douglass's freedom represents a conquest over the anesthetized, mutilated aesthetic issuing from the lived, enslaved body. Why this would be vital emerging from the experience of slavery should be easily understood: the institution of slavery aims to exercise its control, force compliance, and justify itself on the basis of the idea that the slave is merely a *thing*, his or her body an object of commerce, property of another. The *aisthesis* of freedom deploys creative resources that enliven and enable the power of human agency. This is what Douglass achieves in his momentous struggle. He becomes, in the words of Simone de Beauvoir, "apprenticed in freedom" and hence enabled and empowered to revolt against the values that reduce his existence to useful property and exclude him from legitimizing human community.[14] Slavery cements its hold by effecting transmogrified desire and impairment of any sense of the erotic that would enable one to see oneself as a maker of pleasure and beauty, one who shares and introduces meaningful value in the world. What Douglass acquires in the fight with Covey is a kind of *visibility* (both a kind of seeing and being seen) activated by what has been called by others "loving perception," a way of seeing the world such that one seizes upon and finds one's ecstasies in the *possibilities* of what one perceives.[15]

So what can Nietzsche contribute to this vision, and how might we revise Nietzsche's own conception illuminated by that vision? Nietzsche looks to mythic origins of struggle to challenge modern conceptions of competition. Out of this account he develops criteria for ascertaining the use and abuse of power that will allow us to draw, redraw, and recognize limits of power—cooperatively and communally defined—without denying the benefits of resistance for human development or threatening its legitimacy in the course of political struggle. Tracing the elastic social space of the contest (*agon*), Nietzsche locates the emergence of values in an erotic economy of contest. It is this vision that I wish to briefly sketch and consider in light of his conception of moral development and the production of meaning.

Before moving to my discussion of Nietzsche, I wish to draw attention to one more way in which Douglass distinguishes productive expressions of power from those that are destructive. He describes the way in which the slaves' spirit of resistance is further sapped by forcing it into futile outlets. The fight with Covey stands in contrast to the pseudo contests permitted to slaves on holidays. Douglass notes that these events served as a means of "keeping the minds of the slaves occupied with prospective pleasure, within the limits of slavery" (*MB*, 253). They were encouraged to participate in "only those wild and low sports, peculiar to semi-civilized people" (*MB*, 255). On these holidays the masters would encourage a kind of saturnalia that would produce petty and destructive rivalry and drunkenness, suggesting that these characterized the true life of freedom. Once the aftereffects of these activities became apparent, Douglass claims, liberty looked significantly less desirable. Throughout his account, the abusive and corruptive physical force of the community that produced slavery is contrasted with the value of a strengthened spirit (*MB*, 272), one buttressed by the feeling of freedom that is theirs.

II.

What Nietzsche can add to Douglass's vision as I have described the kind of *seeing* made possible through the feeling of power that struggle brings forth is a typology of different kinds of struggles and how they cultivate different desires relating to the pursuit of freedom. Nietzsche interestingly holds a similar view regarding the potentially valuable experiences that are had in the course of struggles or contests, and he considers the opportunities and potential dangers found in both the forms of struggle and the ways of acting within them. Such a framework might provide us with further evaluative criteria for considering Douglass's fight with Covey, in ways perhaps most interesting for those concerned to reconcile Douglass's professed pacifism at the time with his willingness to commit violence in the fight.[16]

Nietzsche's model for struggle is drawn from his consideration of the ancient Greek contest, or *agon*. Although Nietzsche's most extended discussion of that particular form of struggle is found in his unpublished preface to an unwritten book, "Homer's Contest," he develops those ideas and expands them throughout his writings. Most significant for my purposes here is Nietzsche's interest in the different view of competition that he thinks the Greeks held and how that view is relevant to their ethics. Of particular interest to Nietzsche is how a dynamic of localization and circulation of power, specifically put to creative and constructive purposes, can be cultivated through contest and how that mechanism is vulnerable to degeneration and may become deformed if the contest is put to other purposes.[17]

Those discussing Nietzsche's agonism frequently make reference to his account of the text of Hesiod's *Works and Days* that Pausanias is supposed to have seen during his travels in Greece. Unlike the text that the scholars of Nietzsche's day considered legitimate, the copy that Pausanias cites describes two Eris goddesses. Eris is ordinarily associated with strife, conflict, and war. She was considered the source of envy and jealous rage. What is curious about Pausanias's reference to the twin goddesses is that one is considered good: that which brings about dissention bears a strong family resemblance to a fruitful desire, namely, the urge to excel. Nietzsche carefully maps the first goddess to what he describes as a desire to bring about complete destruction of what one opposes—a thirst for destruction—while he identifies the other as inciting a drive to bring out of oneself a performance that exceeds that of the opponent.[18]

Struggles can have either creative or destructive ends and corresponding means to reach them. In his *Human, All-Too-Human*,[19] Nietzsche further distinguishes different kinds of contests when he highlights the modes of action of *rising above* [*erheben*] and *pushing down* [*herabdrücken*] what one opposes: "The envious man is conscious of every respect in which the man he envies exceeds the common measure and desires to push him down [*herabdrücken*] to it—or to raise himself up [*erheben*] to the height of the other: out of which there arise two different modes of action, which Hesiod designated as the evil and the good Eris" (*HH* II (2):29). Just as individuals can manifest these actions, so too can cultures and institutions that regulate the available forms of contest. Nietzsche speculates in "Homer's Contest" that the proliferation of outlets organized on an agonistic model, the form of contest best suited to fostering and rewarding the activity of rising above, accounts for the monumental accomplishments in ancient Greek culture.

That Nietzsche goes beyond simply admiring "a little healthy competition" becomes clear when he subsequently turns his attention to investigating the struggles at the heart of tragic art (*The Birth of Tragedy*), the contest for truth and virtue in Socratic and Platonic philosophy (especially *The Gay Science* and *Beyond Good and Evil*), the adaptation of spiritualized struggle in Christian morality (especially *Daybreak*, *On the Genealogy of Morals*, and *The Antichrist*), and the scientific conceptions of life and health (especially in his lecture notes and *On the Genealogy of Morals*). Nietzsche is particularly interested in how what is distinguished as appropriate and acceptable struggle follows certain political ends and how the corresponding dispositions about competition, resistance, and struggle are reflected in ethical perspectives. Nietzsche considers striving and struggle to be a basic condition of existence, not merely for human beings but for everything that is. Given that, he asks, what form of struggle might best advance human possibilities generally?

Several features of productive contest emerge, although Nietzsche never offers a full exposition of the relevant question.[20] Beyond potentially inspiring excellence, which would presumably be relative to some previously existing standard, agonistic contest is supposed to be radically open, at least this seems to be a feature that Nietzsche specifically designates as exceptional about the view he finds in ancient Greece.[21] The openness is achieved in two respects: first, the viability of challenge must be preserved; second, the contest must be flexible enough to generate decisions about excellence that are relative not only to past performances but also in accordance with new standards produced through the contest itself.[22] In other words, although rare and exceptional, every contest at least extends the possibility that the prevailing standards of measure themselves could be reformed.

The significance of this openness to the community as a whole is evident to Nietzsche in what Diogenes Laertius reports as the original purpose of ostracism: anyone who emerged as an undefeatable opponent had to be banished, as great as such a person might be. This was not because greatness itself was despised; rather, it was out of concern for cultivating the pursuit of excellence as a whole. The latter was to be effected not through reduction to the lowest common denominator but by ever extending the prospect of being able to earn a title to greatness, to participate in creating the standard for what would count as best. Moreover, those standards of judgment were being constantly formulated and renegotiated in every instance of rendering a decision. Nietzsche cites the most exemplary contestants as those who not only offered an exceptional performance in the contest but also revised the very standards by which they were judged. Nietzsche's admiration of these features of contest makes it clear that he is not simply nostalgic for a heroic ethic of nobility lost, and he is not pining for a return to the good old days of Homer. Moreover, it is worth considering the relations between victors, competitors, and the community that will provide the institutional framework for such agonistic enterprises to occur.

Although contests typically end when a particular individual distinguishes himself or herself in whatever way the contest sets up as decisive, there is a significant communal basis to this distinction. Victors can only become such by virtue of the institutions that make their activities meaningful in such a way; they require a certain kind of communal recognition for their actions to afford them any sort of status or special significance; victories are always contingent upon the community whose judgment provides the basis of legitimacy for any such claim to superiority. Thus victors are always indebted for their honor to those who would bestow it; it is not simply taken or even independently earned. Moreover, victors are significantly indebted to other competitors, those immediate and those who have preceded them. Their actions both supply a contest relative to which the victors' actions appear as excellent and draw out the particular performance that earned the victor his or her distinction.[23]

The fragility of these arrangements is underscored by Nietzsche as he charts examples of corruption of agonistic relations. These are interesting to consider, because they provide further insight into how Nietzsche refines his understanding of the distinction between creative and destructive expressions of power. Although the Greeks are Nietzsche's exemplars of agonism, they clearly failed to sustain this remarkable feature of their culture.[24] Exceptional victory has a tendency to induce *hybris*, a belief in invincibility that can lead to the commission of violence, and a lack of respect for one's opponents and the shared institutions that legitimate the triumph.[25] Nietzsche claims that this happened in Athens following the Persian Wars—when the Athenians showed themselves to be such decisive victors in the war against the Persians, they disrupted the rivalry among the Greek city-states that had previously prevailed and served to regulate the significance of what it meant to be "Greek".[26] Public contests that provided creative outlets for the desire to strive deteriorated into spectacle. Without the creation of a new outlet for struggle, Nietzsche imagines, the Greeks might have become so brutal as to engage in wanton destruction and annihilation of each other (*BT* 15). Instead, what emerged as a replacement for the kind of contests he admired was Socratic philosophy with its dialectic, which had the *appearance* of the old kind of struggle.[27] But dialectic was significantly different, according to Nietzsche, because it failed to provide the openness described earlier. First, dialectic was dominated by an unbeatable opponent, namely, the Socratic position of truth, and, secondly, the standards of judgment were absolutely uncontestable—reason rules tyrannically in Nietzsche's caricature. Moreover, with the Socratic game struggles that constituted the public sphere were replaced with spiritual ones waged by individuals. And with that, the cultural (social) possibilities withered.

Nietzsche's tale continues to unfold as he traces the genealogy of the spiritual contest of Socratic-Platonic philosophy to Christian morality and even in contemporary scientific theory of organic development and health. Throughout, Nietzsche remains attentive to *forms* of the struggles, the kinds of actions within them they encouraged, and their prospects for providing the benefits of earlier forms of contest. Nietzsche's account depicts the contest becoming increasingly closed and increasingly more violent, even when, and perhaps most especially when, aggressive actions of struggle, resistance, and challenge are deemed inappropriate in the name of advancing civilization or morality. On Nietzsche's account, as this process continues, human beings also become less free, not because their will to be brutal is restrained but because they have less access to creative struggle than before.

But what is the goal of creative struggle? Ultimately and at their best, creative struggles aim at the production of new values and meanings. Nietzsche thought the productive kind of contest was at the heart of tragic art. The *agon* of the Apollinian and Dionysian artistic forces created an arena in which the best was drawn out of each in a dynamic through which neither was allowed to dominate. Unlike Aristotle, Nietzsche thought the real fruit of tragedy was not *catharsis* but an *aisthesis* of human being through which what it means to be human is given a *felt sense*, which is inaccessible solely through the idealized image of the Apollinian or the rapturous Dionysian. Tragic art, for Nietzsche, effected a magical transformation in which the entire symbolism of the body was called into play (*BT* 2). Rather than purging the audience of pity and fear, tragedy provided its witnesses opportunities "to see oneself transformed before one's own eyes and to begin to act as if one had actually entered into another body." Tragic art dramatized the struggle between competing perspectives of the individualized and undifferentiated, the intelligible and the mysterious. It represented the creative appropriation of opposition and resistance.[28]

It is this emphasis on the transformative and liberating affects of the felt quality of the experience of struggle that I think Douglass and Nietzsche share, at least insofar as they are attentive to the sense of agency that potentially emerges in such engagements. Clearly Douglass did not figure his fight with Covey in terms of the ancient Greek *agon*, and certainly Nietzsche did not look to the struggles for freedom enacted by enslaved Africans as a model for the kind of struggles he admired as genuinely liberatory. But I think Douglass and Nietzsche do share a conception of agency requisite for realizing meaningful freedom. Both highlight how such a form of agency can emerge through specific experiences of struggle, mindful of how those struggles differ from the commission of violence. And both give consideration to how what is at stake in such interactions is not simply recognition as a member of a community of those entitled to rule but rather understanding oneself as a participant in the community of those who determine the qualities of legitimate power.

Thus far my account of how Nietzsche thinks about the use and abuse of power in relation to struggle and its transformative possibilities, leaves unaddressed several serious ways in which Nietzsche diverges from Douglass on these matters, and these concerns have a bearing on the charge of racism mentioned in the introduction. It should be clear that although I do not think Nietzsche is an advocate of cruelty and violence—the evidence for which is his condemnation of anti-agonistic views on the grounds that they actually constitute a celebration of cruelty and torture as they shut down opportunities for creative expressions of force as discussed above—Nietzsche is clearly no pacifist, and he acknowledges that there is no ultimate constraint against abusive expressions of power. Nonetheless, Nietzsche thinks we will be less interested, less in need of pursuing a sense of ourselves as agents through violent force if and when we have the opportunity to cultivate a sense of ourselves as powerful in ways that actually enhance the significance of our possibilities generally. Nietzsche's genealogies of slavish moralities highlight well this very concern and render more intelligible his discussion of suffering.[29]

III.

Nietzsche's *Genealogy*[30] provides multiple histories of births of moralities and the sets of values they found. More specifically, Nietzsche is interested in the origin and mechanics of value creation. The text traces several, mythic births and the struggles that form the basis of these inventions. Essay two considers the "breeding" of "the animal who is permitted to make promises" (*GM* II:1; translation my own).[31] The point is to trace the psychic evolution of morality, which Nietzsche sees as loosely analogous to physiological development. Like the physical body, the psyche has a process of nutrition. Nietzsche's account of morality in the second essay considers the cultivation of the capacities that enable us to be morally responsible and prone to guilt and bad conscience, for which memory is necessary, interrupting or blocking the process of "inpsychation." Inpsychation is Nietzsche's term of art for describing "the fact that what we experience and absorb enters our consciousness as little while we are digesting it [. . .] as does the thousandfold process, involved in physical nourishment—so-called 'incorporation'" (*GM* II:1). In psychic digestion, forgetting plays an *active* role; without it, "there could be no happiness, no cheerfulness, no hope, no pride, no *present*" (*GM* II:1). The introduction of memory, Nietzsche suggests, potentially clogs that process to the point of resulting in psychic dyspepsia. Morality in requiring practices of memory that incapacitate vital forgetting could be considered, on this account, a *disease*.[32]

The rest of the second essay of the *Genealogy* investigates the preconditions that make human being susceptible to psychic indigestion. He describes the emergence of the "sovereign individual" (*GM* II:2), an ideal type whose signature features are being conscious of his own power and freedom, a master of free will, and in possession of conscience. This figure appears in many discussions of Nietzsche's vision for what it might mean to advance "beyond good and evil," beyond the slavish morality that Nietzsche thinks we still embrace. An important consideration, though, is *whose* ideal the sovereign individual is supposed to be. I have argued at length elsewhere that it is definitely *not* Nietzsche's.[33] The relevant evidence for this, in the context of the present discussion, is Nietzsche's characterization of the practices of memory required to make it possible for our *present morality* (perhaps synonymous with Kantian morality with its emphasis on autonomy[34]) to hold up the ideal of sovereignty as its highest moral aim, how this has made it *diseased* (as discussed earlier) and how this has a basis in *destructive violence*. Conscience—as the right to stand security for oneself, as a prerequisite for having the right to affirm oneself—requires *memory*. Among the *mnemotechnics*, as Nietzsche describes the techniques for producing memory, about which "the oldest psychology" teaches us is enduring pain, which produces the most-lasting memories (*GM* II:3). Systems of cruelty, sacrifice, and mutilation—and all ascetic practices generally—serve the function of "fixing ideas," of burning memory into the flesh, of infusing the body with remembrance.

In this particular telling of the story of the development of morality, guilt and bad conscience emerge not out of a sense of responsibility but rather out of an economic system that required memory for the repayment of debts. Nietzsche discusses the logic of compensation that brings with it warrant and title to cruelty (*GM* II:5). He notes how evaluations become tied to the body, its parts and limbs construed in terms of equivalences. Recompense takes the form of pleasure in violation, whereby a creditor earns as his tribute the right to abuse, to vent his power freely over others (*GM* II:5). Moral debt, guilt, and responsibility are as soaked in blood and torture, as Nietzsche tells the story, and once these ideas took root in the moral realm, cruelty became even more refined and memory—through the intensification of suffering and pain—even more enduring.

One might ask, "[t]o what extent can suffering balance debts or guilt?" Nietzsche conjectures, "To the extent that to *make* suffer was in the highest degree pleasurable, to the extent that the injured party exchanged for the loss he had sustained, including the displeasure caused by the loss, an extraordinary counterbalancing pleasure: that of *making* suffer—a genuine *festival*" (*GM* II:6). Higher culture is built upon these practices of torture and cruelty. Nietzsche does not note this to celebrate the fact or invite even greater torture in order to advance culture further still. The prevailing question of the *Genealogy* is whether and how human beings might be able to get beyond these ascetic practices as their method of advancement.

Nietzsche's discussion of suffering in the seventh section of the second essay occurs in the context elaborated earlier. The preceding sections investigate the production of suffering as serving, first, economic and, later, political and moral ends. The brutalization of the body for such purposes has, through Christianization, become "translated into the imaginative and psychical and adorned with such innocent names that even the tenderest and most hypocritical conscience is not suspicious of them" (*GM* II:7). Nietzsche suggests that Christianity took root so quickly and was so compelling precisely because it *intensified* rather than alleviated pain—enhancement of the meaning of human existence was tied to the endurance of pain, and then the screws were turned. Power became measured by the amount of suffering one could *endure* rather than the amount of suffering one could *inflict*. The production and escalation of suffering were required to make life seem even more desirable. Bred with the capacity to promise, the animal that became the human, striving to be an angel, became a grotesque creature that celebrates and craves its own torture, a being with a penchant for masochism.

It is in this light that Nietzsche's conjecture[35] about "Negroes" and animals as less susceptible to pain occurs. William A. Preston cites it as evidence of both Nietzsche's cruelty and his racism.[36] Considered in context, however, it clearly cannot be read as a justification for torture. The passage reads:

> Perhaps in those days [when making suffer was pleasurable]—the delicate may be comforted by this thought—pain did not hurt as much as it does now; at least that is a conclusion a doctor may arrive at who has treated Negroes (taken as representative of prehistoric man—) for severe internal inflammations that would drive even the best constituted European to distraction—in the case of Negroes they do *not* do so. The curve of human susceptibility to pain seems in fact to take an extraordinary and almost sudden drop as soon as one has passed the upper ten thousand or ten million of the top stratum of culture; and for my own part, I have no doubt that the combined suffering of all the animals ever subjected to the knife for scientific ends is utterly negligible compared with *one* painful night of a single hysterical bluestocking. (*GM* II:7, emphasis)

Preston reads this as justification for the torture of Negroes[37]—*why not enslave and torment them—aren't they really as insensitive as animals, anyway?* But that presumes that Nietzsche values the "hysterical bluestocking," that the hysteric's sensitivity is legitimate and worthy of consideration. But that does not seem to be the case at all in this passage. The bluestocking is *hysterical*, and he is so precisely because of his *bizarre* susceptibility to pain; he is pathetic, not morally superior. Hence, that with which he is contrasted—animals and "Negroes"—avoid such condemnation. Animals and Negroes are less *dis*-eased, not less worthy; they fare better, from a Nietzschean perspective, than the miserable bluestocking who is nearly undone in a single night of pain. Nietzsche's characterization of "Negroes" as primitive and exemplary of "prehistoric" man no doubt betrays a kind of ignorance and pernicious prejudice that others would use in the justification of slavery, but his discussion of suffering here is not part of an attempt to justify racially based slavery or the torture of others.

Mindful of these concerns, one is better positioned to consider the production of meaning through the "interpret[ation] of a whole mysterious machinery of salvation into suffering" (*GM* II:7). In the grips of the logic of suffering, exemplars of struggle shift from heroes who accomplish great deeds—whose actions are considered to extend the range of human meaning—to paragons of excruciating suffering, the suffering Christ, the turning of the other cheek. As the second essay of the *Genealogy* tells the story, early human beings sought the *aisthesis* of power and freedom in the *infliction* of pain and suffering. Hurting others was pleasurable, because it gave one a sense of one's power and oneself as free. Morality, particularly Christian morality, gained its hold through a reversal of the process: *accepting harm* and *enduring suffering* provided the measure of one's power and freedom. One compelled by such a worldview could conceivably be led to the extraordinarily perverse conclusion that domination and torture are actually *morally enriching*, in short, that slavery would not be something to resist but rather would provide opportunities to be savored.[38] Nietzsche imagines what might constitute the next stage of development of humanity. Would it be yet another reversal back to preferring the *infliction* of suffering, which would seem to constitute a regression, or would it seek the *aisthesis* of power and freedom creatively, thereby breaking from the two prior destructive models? Nietzsche's notion of self-overcoming is an experimental effort to go beyond those paradigms.

When, in his later philosophy, Nietzsche turns his attention to spiritualized struggles he rejects ascetic forms of internalized contest, because he thinks they are essentially *self*-destructive insofar as they draw us into harmful and crippling activities of pushing down (drawing on the model of destructive contest elaborated earlier). The alternative that Nietzsche develops, the practice of self-overcoming, is supposed to enact a productive, creative mode of rising above, similar in its structure, although potentially different in its content, to Homer's revaluation of human existence as contest. The model of self-overcoming that emerges out of Nietzsche's middle and later writings utilizes the language of biology to describe the dynamic. In the process of self-overcoming, what one has been is incorporated and appropriated in the course of the *Kampf* that one is: "Thus the body goes through history, a becoming [*ein Werdender*] and a fighting [*ein Kämpfender*]. And the spirit—what is that to the body? The herald of its fights and victories, companion and echo" (*Z* 1: "Gift-Giving"; my translation).[39] It is true that the social benefits of this process are not the *central* concern in Nietzsche's later thought, but that does not mean that Nietzsche's later agonism is void of communal transformative applications. Speaking from a community that does not struggle in any way other than what is violent and destructive, Nietzsche attempts—perhaps feebly so—to envision a community of free spirits of which his fighting spirit will be properly a part. The solitude he laments and attempts to appropriate is not a goal but rather a consequence of the spiritual lethargy of those around him.

IV.

In conclusion, I suggest that the transgressive spirit that Nietzsche's work describes resonates with remarkable similarity to that which Douglass's work bears witness. Each seeks the overcoming of an aesthetic of agency that finds its ecstasies in sadism and masochism. Both demand that we ignite what we might call the eristic-erotic, or what I elsewhere designate the "erisotic"[40] in our pursuit of a life-enhancing and an enabling form of spirit, developed through resistance and agonistic engagement. Conceptualizing social relations in terms of the *erisotic* would reflect an understanding of both how loving and striving are inextricably bound and how both *bind us together*. Although I think that we would be right to claim that Douglass's work better exemplifies the significance the Other plays in this process,[41] I think Nietzsche has more to contribute to the discussion than some would allow. By tracing Nietzsche's interest in what he identifies as the agonistic form of striving, by connecting it to a particular mode of being and a specific type of approach to obstacles and challenges, we can take steps toward answering what I believe are some of the most serious charges against Nietzsche—that he is an *advocate* of war, violence, and cruelty—without watering down Nietzsche's claim that serious and significant struggles inform the kinds of lives we lead and the kinds of persons we become.

Finally, I wish to emphasize the positive aspects of Nietzsche's work that he also intends his readers to emulate. Despite his frequently gloomy disposition toward contemporary culture, Nietzsche understands himself as an advocate of love, as well as joy, and as one who strives to diminish the prevalence of cruelty. Zarathustra tells us that "life is a well of joy," but so far we have enjoyed too little life, for "[A]s long as there have been men, man has felt too little joy: that alone, my brothers, is our original sin. And learning better to feel joy, we learn best not to hurt others or to plan hurts for them" (*Z* II:3). When we better learn to realize the joy that is available in life, Nietzsche claims, we also will learn to diminish the role we play in inflicting and perpetuation harm and cruelty on others.

Still, my generous reading of Nietzsche alongside Douglass does not completely exonerate Nietzsche of the charges thus described. Nietzsche can and should be criticized for not taking seriously the real problems of suffering as they are experienced by persons who are physically and emotionally exploited, those who are starving, and those who live in communities devastated by war. I believe the qualifications I have made to what counts as agonistic and what does not help us recognize that those sufferings clearly do not fit the category of that which increases our health and strength; they are not examples of "going(s) under" that prepare us for overcomings. But Nietzsche was not as careful as he might have been in making those distinctions, and I do not mean to suggest that his work does not leave him vulnerable for other attacks.

Both Douglass and Nietzsche envision a subject who exercises freedom in creative appropriation of the meaning of human being. The agonized spirit is not simply hostile and aggressive. It does not seek the expression of power unbound. Indeed, the agonized spirit comes to appreciate that the *aisthesis* of powerful freedom is relational, and Douglass, particularly, is ever mindful of the ways in which real life struggles against the most oppressive forces afford us opportunities not only to forge an image of ourselves as individuals but also to give shape to our humanity. Neither Douglass nor Nietzsche adequately develops an ethos of agonism, although I hope these *unlikely illuminations* have shed light on the ways in which both provide us with resources to take up that task for ourselves.

Notes

1. Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Gay Science* (*GS*), trans. Walter Kaufmann (New York: Vintage Books, 1974), section 377. I return to this concern in the penultimate section of this chapter.

2. This particular charge against Nietzsche is levied by William A. Preston in his "Nietzsche on Blacks," in *Existence in Black: An Anthology of Black Existential Philosophy*, edited and with an introduction by Lewis R. Gordon (New York: Routledge, 1997), 169. I address Preston's article in greater detail in this chapter.

3. I am not the first to attempt such an interpretive exercise. Cynthia Willett's *Maternal Ethics and Other Slave Moralities* (New York: Routledge, 1995) precedes my account here. The material for this chapter began ten years ago as a commentary on that book, and I am grateful to Willett for her comments on a much different earlier draft. (Subsequently, she reiterated many of her claims about Douglass and a few of those about Nietzsche, with some slight modifications in her *The Soul of Justice: Social Bonds and Racial Hubris* [Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2001].) Willett's project is quite different from mine. She makes other points of comparison, and I take issue with the conclusions she draws. Where relevant, I shall engage Willett's interesting work in the notes that follow. For now, I shall simply mention her ultimate claims.

Willett compares Douglass to Nietzsche in order to show how Douglass similarly shares Nietzsche's critique of the "stoic rational" tradition of ethics in Western culture, and how their anti-asceticism is related to their conceptions of ("phallic") "will to power" and the importance of the body. But Willett argues that their views diverge on their conceptions of freedom and community. While Nietzsche seeks sovereign, dominating individuality, Willett claims, Douglass holds a conception of will that is interested in power but has a "prosocial" goal. As I argue in what follows, I have found in Nietzsche a sustained and somewhat detailed account of distinctions between destructive violence and creative agonism, which I find in Douglass, too. This distinction is relevant to how each conceives freedom, which I discuss later.

4. Frederick Douglass, *My Bondage and My Freedom* (New York: Dover, 1969). This work is hereafter cited in the text as *MB*, followed by the page number; emphasis is in the original unless otherwise indicated.

5. For a discussion of the masculine character of Douglass's reflections, see Richard Yarborough, "Race, Violence, and Manhood: The Masculine Ideal in Frederick Douglass's 'The Heroic Slave'," in *Haunted Bodies: Gender and Southern Texts*, ed. Anne Goodwyn Jones and Susan V. Donaldson (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 1997), 159–84.

6. I think this distinction is *somewhat* missed by Willett. For Douglass, it seems, what he describes as the *spirit* this encounter ignited welled up from the particular kind of power he managed to exercise, and not just its goal or end. Douglass's account of the fight with Covey and the role it played in his moral development are indicative for Willett of the fact that Douglass has a notion of "a certain will to power" (Willett, *Maternal Ethics*, 163). Precisely what is "will to power" for Douglass or for Nietzsche remains relatively unclear in Willett's work, although this reader gets the sense that it is supposed to be (self-evidently?) bad, masculinist, possibly misogynistic, "hybristic" (163), "repressive," and bound up with an "escapist fantasy" (167). Willett associates "will to power" with what she characterizes as the "mythos of the sovereign individual" (165), which is possibly a throwback to the Western emphasis on autonomy in the case of Nietzsche, but which is superceded by Douglass. I return to the figure of the sovereign individual later, since this characterization of power and the figure of its ideal expression are relevant to the conception of freedom Willett ascribes to Nietzsche and uses as a foil for Douglass's view.

7. As mentioned earlier, Willett's comparison of Douglass and Nietzsche is organized, in part, around discussion of how both aim to revalue the meaning of the body. Willett links this in both Nietzsche and Douglass, at least in part, to a renewed emphasis on the animality of humanity. But animality has very different connotations for each, as Willett portrays their views: Douglass awakens "animal sprits," while Nietzsche celebrates anti-social and violent *bestiality*. The claim concerning Nietzsche's celebration of bestiality revolves around his supposed reverie in violence. I return to this issue later.

8. Drucilla Cornell, *At the Heart of Freedom: Feminism, Sex and Equality* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1998), x. Also see her *The Imaginary Domain: Abortion, Pornography, and Sexual Harassment* (New York: Routledge, 1995).

9. Cornell, *At the Heart*, 10.

10. Cornell, *At the Heart*, 8.

11. I discuss these ideas in the context of analysis of works by Toni Morrison and by Ntozake Shange in my "Authorizing Desire Erotic Poetics and the *Aisthesis* of Freedom," in *(Un)Making Race, Re-Making Soul: Transformative Aesthetics and the Practice of Freedom*, ed. Christa Davis Acampora and Angela Cotten (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2007).

12. Cornell, *At the Heart*, 62.

13. This is apparently the view of Robert Levine, *Martin Delany, Frederick Douglass, and the Political of Representative Identity* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1997), with which Frank M. Kirkland takes issue in his "Enslavement, Moral Suasion, and Struggles for Recognition: Frederick Douglass's Answer to the Question—'What is Enlightenment?'" in *Frederick Douglass: A Critical Reader*, ed. Bill E. Lawson and Frank M. Kirkland (Malden, MA: Blackwell, 1999). Kirkland criticizes emphases on self-legislation as the most significant feature of the fight with Covey for Douglass, since it follows from such an account that *"the action Douglass takes on himself takes precedent over the action he takes against Covey"* (298, emphasis in original). In such a case, "Douglass's freedom is [. . .] placed *outside* the interaction-context or the struggle with Covey" (298, emphasis in original). I also wish to emphasize the significance of the action taken within the context of the struggle and the way in which it created a particular experience that produced the sensations and insights described earlier. What is significant for my view is that the fight provided Douglass with a unique experience, the felt quality of which gave Douglass a new sense of his freedom. It was not simply an occasion of learning something that he had not recognized before or an opportunity for solidifying his moral principles through concrete action. My interpretation differs from those of others in its emphasis on the aesthetic significance as it relates to agency. Other interesting and highly noteworthy readings of the fight with Covey include Bernard R. Boxill's "The Fight with Covey," in *Existence in Black*, 273–90. Boxill sees the fight understood by Douglass as demonstrating "a willingness to stand up for the principles of morality," and that this is what Douglass means by "force (or power)" (287). He further claims that power is "a capacity to arouse the fear of others" (290). Also see Lewis R. Gordon, "Douglass as an Existentialist" in *Existentia Africana: Understanding Africana Existential Thought* (New York: Routledge, 2000), 41–61. Gordon claims that the fight with Covey is chiefly an account of Douglass's realization of his agency: "He speaks of force, but force here is ambiguous since he also contrasts it with helplessness. Force here refers to will, to agency, to the human being as active. At the very heart of the tale, then, is a statement on agency" (59–60).

14. See Simone de Beauvoir, *The Ethics of Ambiguity* (New York: Citadel, 1991), 35–40.

15. The idea of "loving perception" is discussed by numerous writers. It is initially defined in Marilyn Frye's *The Politics of Reality: Essays in Feminist Theory* (Trumansburg, NY: The Crossing Press, 1983). Also see María Lugones, "Playfulness, 'World'-Travelling, and Loving Perception," (Hypatia 2:2 [Summer 1987] pp. 3–19), who specifically objects to an agonistic conception of the self and relations to others, and Lewis R. Gordon, "Existential Dynamics of Theorizing Black Invisibility," in *Existence in Black*.

16. I am less concerned with this particular problem, but the connection to Nietzsche is found here too, albeit with a different twist. Nietzsche never professes pacifism, of course, but he is accused of being an advocate of violence. Douglass's willingness to physically resist Covey appears to some to be more compatible with his writings after 1850, when he breaks with pacifist abolitionists and begins to publicly support violent resistance by slaves against slaveholders. Although Douglass was no doubt, in his words, "resolved to fight," I do not see his actions as violent in this particular encounter with Covey. If anything, he exhibits remarkable restraint for a man whose life is quite literally at stake. I think Nietzsche's conception of different kinds of contests and modes of actions, which aims to distinguish creative from destructive or violent activities, further supports the idea that Douglass was not committing violence in his fight with Covey, and so the conflict with his pacifist views is less significant.

17. This is precisely what Nietzsche thinks happened to ancient Greek *agon* following its co-option in Platonic philosophy and Christian morality. I develop these ideas at greater length in several articles, which were published after this text was written but was still awaiting publication, including "*Demos Agonistes Redux*: Reflections on the *Streit* of Political Agonism," *Nietzsche-Studien* 32 (2003): 373–89; "Nietzsche's Agonal Wisdom," *International Studies in Philosophy* 35:3 (Fall 2003): 205–25; and "Of Dangerous Games and Dastardly Deeds: A Typology of Nietzsche's Contests," *International Studies in Philosophy* 34:3 (Fall 2002): 135–51. Most of the ideas raised in this section appear in some form in these articles.

18. See Friedrich Nietzsche, "Homer's Contest" trans. Christa Davis Acampora, *Nietzscheana* V: 1996 pp. i–iv and 1–8. Thus I find a *qualitative* distinction in Nietzsche's conception of power, and not merely a *quantitative* one, as Willett describes (*Maternal Ethics*, 165).

19. Friedrich Nietzsche, *Human, All-Too-Human*, trans. R. J. Hollingdale (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1986).

20. The closest he comes to providing an affirmative answer to this question might be through his *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, which might account for why he admired it so greatly.

21. See "Homer's Contest" and Nietzsche's notebooks from the 1870s.

22. These two features make Nietzsche's work particularly appealing to political philosophers working on radical democratic theory. See for example, Alan Schrift's "Nietzsche *for* Democracy?," *Nietzsche-Studien* 29 (2000): 220–33; Herman Siemens, "Nietzsche and Agonistic Politics: A Review of Recent Literature," *Nietzsche-Studien* 30 (2001): 509–26; Acampora, "*Demos Agonistes Redux*: Reflections on the *Streit* of Political Agonism," *Nietzsche-Studien* 32 (2003): 373–89.

23. This system of indebtedness, its multiple layers and circuits, is playfully treated by Pindar in his ode for Hagesidamos, the boys' boxing victor in 476 B.C.E., *Olympian X*; it also is where Pindar recounts the founding of the Olympic games.

24. In "Homer's Contest," Nietzsche offers the *hybris* of Miltiades as evidence that the Greeks were waning in their capacity to properly cultivate the agonistic spirit. Similar comments can be found in his notes for the unfinished "untimely meditation" on philology.

25. In *Maternal Ethics*, Willett repeatedly describes Nietzsche's conception of power as hubristic. In her later book, *The Soul of Justice*, more extensive discussions of hybris are found. There Willett draws interesting and illuminating comparisons between the tragedy of Toni Morrison's *Beloved* and the conception of tragedy in ancient Greek culture (see especially chapters 7 and 9). Willett emphasizes that Morrison's tragic story reveals *hybris* striking against "the libidinal core of the soul," and she contrasts this view with what she takes to be *hybris* as conceived by "the Greeks." The chief distinction is supposed to be the fact that boundaries drawn by Greek *hybris* are meant to protect the economy of glory and honor circulating among individuals through contests, whereas in Morrison's narrative, there is an erotic core, which is essentially social, that suffers the insult of arrogance. I do not think we have a rigid distinction between individual and social interest in these examples. Although the ancient Greek conception of *hybris* is tied to the commission of impropriety in contest, its assault is not against the honor of the individual with whom one engages. Rather, *hybris* is a failure to understand and/or respect the (human) relational nature of contest and its *social* rather than merely *egoistic* priority. The outrage is shared communally, and the community does not simply take on the insult vicariously through the contestant with whom the guilty party was engaged. One way of reading the whither and wherefore of *agon* in ancient Greek culture is that such contests constituted particular manifestations of an erotic channel in the social libidinal economy. I have argued earlier that such a view is consistent with Nietzsche's considerations of productive contest and its perversions.

26. Nietzsche tells this fable of Greek history in several different contexts: in "Homer's Contest," in his notebooks from the 1870s, particularly in the notes for an untimely meditation on philology, and in *The Birth of Tragedy*, when he tries to account for the influence of Socratism and its relation to the end of tragedy. See Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Birth of Tragedy (BT)*, in *The Birth of Tragedy and The Case of Wagner*, trans. Walter Kaufmann (New York: Viking, 1967), section 15.

27. Nietzsche tells this part of the story twice, and a comparison is interesting. See (the early) *BT* 15 and (the late) in *Twilight of the Idols*, "The Problem of Socrates."

28. This account stands in contrast to Willett's characterization of Nietzsche's view of the Dionysian and the tragic in her *Maternal Ethics*, 172–73, but it resonates in interesting ways with her conclusions about Douglass's sense of the dynamic of sameness and difference (or what Willett later calls "hyphenated duality, or the correspondence of Self and Other" [173]).

29. Willett's characterization of Nietzsche's views is largely drawn from *GM*, and her conception of *will to power* is drawn from her readings of the first essay's account of the birth of slave morality and the second essay's reference to the "sovereign individual." I treat the latter issue in the section that follows, and I further elaborate Nietzsche's critique of violence and his views on suffering. Since I do not discuss the first essay of *GM* in this chapter, I shall just briefly comment on Willett's interpretation of that part of the text here as it runs counter to the view I am advancing. Willett claims that Nietzsche "celebrates a kind of predatory violence in those of strong will" and "applauds criminality" (164), but the passage she cites in support of the former claim (*GM* I:13, the (in)famous section on lambs and birds of prey) is not normative; in fact, it highlights the absurdity of moralizing the situation—that birds of prey *eat* lambs. It is no more praised and celebrated than it is denigrated. And the passage she cites in support of the claim about criminality (*GM* I:11) also is supposed to be *descriptive*, characterizing how the so-called nobles might think about themselves (and not how we *should* or *should not* evaluate them or whether we should try to be like them). I think Nietzsche's purpose for *describing* things in this way is to encourage his readers to consider the possibility that much of what we hold and value as "good" has a *brutal* basis and not that we should strive to be *more violent* or that violence is thereby justified.

For Willett, "Nietzsche's hero [which she apparently takes to be the "noble" of *GM* I] revels in the freedom from social constraint" (164). And she claims that Nietzsche's conception of animality and the human share in animality consists specifically in the possibility of committing violence (165). But in characterizing things in this way, Willett already judges the kinds of activities that might constitute expressions of animal vitality as morally suspect (which is precisely what moralities rooted in cruelty do). Moreover, she fails to appreciate how elsewhere in Nietzsche's works he specifically distinguishes creative and destructive activities (which for him are related to, if not synonymous with, *life-enhancing* or *healthy* and *life-denying* or *decadent* activities). I have argued that Douglass's own account of his resort to violence and the particular way in which his spirit was enlivened in his fight with Covey bears a similar sense of this distinction I find in Nietzsche's works.

30. Friedrich Nietzsche, *On the Genealogy of Morals (GM)*, in *On the Genealogy of Morals and Ecce Homo*, trans. Walter Kaufmann (New York: Vintage Books, 1967); emphasis in the original unless otherwise indicated.

31. Kaufmann's translation renders this as "with the right to make promises." I argue against this translation and explain the consequences of failing to do so in my "On Sovereignty and Overhumanity: Why It Matters How We Read Nietzsche's *Genealogy* II:2," *International Studies in Philosophy* 36:3 (Fall 2004), 128–29.

32. I further discuss the significance of "forgetting" in Nietzsche's works, particularly in the context of *GM* in my unpublished manuscript "Forgetting the Subject."

33. See my "On Sovereignty and Overhumanity," cited earlier.

34. See Lawrence J. Hatab, *A Nietzschean Defense of Democracy: An Experiment in Postmodern Politics* (Chicago: Open Court Press, 1995), 37–38.

35. Nietzsche reminds his readers that his discussion of suffering and cruelty and its motives is conjecture in *GM* II:6.

36. William A. Preston, "Nietzsche on Blacks," in *Existence in Black*.

37. "But on the issue of the humanity of black people, there is no equivocation in Nietzsche," Preston writes. He continues, "Nietzsche addressed black suffering—of that there should be no doubt—but his intent, it appears from his writings, was to *make blacks suffer more*" ("Nietzsche on Blacks," 168, emphasis in original). The passage cited from *GM* II:7 is offered as Preston's most substantial evidence that Nietzsche is a racist. He does not discuss the context of the passage at all, not even in terms of the book generally. He does not elaborate precisely *how* it is racist, except to draw the conclusion that Nietzsche thinks Africans are subhuman. The abhorrent nature of Nietzsche's philosophy is presumed self-evident. Nietzsche certainly conjectures that Christianized humanity suffers more, but why does Preston think their suffering *matters more* to Nietzsche? This portion of Preston's article is the most prominent prong in the three-pronged case for Nietzsche's racism, and I think it requires much more support; the other prongs might be more promising. Preston claims that Nietzsche is not merely (embarrassingly) an occasional racist, but rather that his philosophy is racist through and through. Preston emphasizes Nietzsche's largely European and Asiatic audience, claiming that it addresses itself only to whites, thereby (intentionally?) excluding blacks. Moreover, Nietzsche attacks the very philosophical frameworks that would extend equality to blacks—chiefly the progressive, egalitarian philosophies of the French and Russian revolutions. But there seems to be no evidence at all that Nietzsche attacks those philosophies *because* they would extend equality to blacks, or that egalitarian philosophies are the only ones that might provide a basis for black liberation. Nietzsche's critique of egalitarian political movements and theories is fruitfully explored and framed in terms of the agonistic model discussed earlier, in Lawrence J. Hatab's *A Nietzschean Defense of Democracy*, especially 28–39, 94–107.

38. To some extent, one might argue, Nietzsche himself dangerously flirts with this very conclusion. He claims that growth can be fostered through a type of spiritualized slavery that instructs as it teaches what it means to hold uncompromisingly values and perspectives. Slavery thereby teaches "the *narrowing of our perspective*, and thus in a certain sense stupidity, as a condition of life and growth. 'You shall obey—someone and for a long time: *else* you will perish and lose the last respect for yourself'—this appears to me to be the moral imperative of nature which, to be sure, is neither 'categorical' as the old Kant would have it (hence the 'else') nor addressed to the individual (what do individuals matter to her?), but to peoples, races, ages, classes—but above all to the whole human animal, to *man*" (Friedrich Nietzsche, *Beyond Good and Evil* [*BGE*], trans. Walter Kaufmann [New York: Vintage Books, 1966], section 188). Nietzsche does not intend the enslavement of groups or races of people but all of humanity, if it is humanity that is meant to pursue a higher form of existence. He tells us, "Becoming a philosopher is not something that one can learn; one must 'know' it, from experience" (*BGE* 213). Again, recalling the language that he uses to describe the higher self, Nietzsche claims that "[f]or every high world one must be born or to speak clearly, one must be *cultivated* [*gezüchtet*] for it" (*BGE* 213). The passages on slavery in *Beyond Good and Evil* should be compared to those in *The Gay Science*, where Nietzsche declares how he and "children of the future," those who are "homeless" because they do not hold the same values as their contemporaries, view their tasks: "We simply do not consider it desirable that a realm of justice and concord should be established on earth (because it would certainly be the realm of the deepest leveling and *chinoiserie*); we are delighted with all who love, as we do, danger, war, and adventures, who refuse to compromise, to be captured, reconciled, and castrated; we count ourselves among conquerors; we think about the necessity for new orders, also for a new slavery—for every strengthening and enhancement of the human type also involves a new kind of enslavement " (*GS* 377). Slavery cultivates, on Nietzsche's view, and although we might prefer that he had chosen another way to describe how one acquires the kinds of experiences that enhance one's development, it is clear that Nietzsche does not have in mind a return to slavery as it has been experienced in the past. The kind of slavery he envisions is not for the weak, whose values he critiques in the *Genealogy*; Nietzsche's new form of slavery is meant for the strong. Throughout *The Gay Science*, Nietzsche uses the first-person plural "we." He is addressing a community of free spirits, of which he believes himself to be a part. He strives to describe both their experiences as "untimely" and their tasks for the future. Nietzsche does not imagine himself and his company to establish any sort of rule or social order. Quite the opposite is true. Nietzsche writes, "We prefer to live on mountains, apart, 'untimely'" (*GS* 377). It is this group of free spirits who must assume the burdens of humanity as the "overly obligated heirs of thousands of years of European spirit" (*GS* 377). It is they who must take on the "new struggles" (*GS* 108), who must experience the "great pain" that "compels us philosophers to descend into our ultimate depths" (*GS* P 2:3), for those experiences make them "more profound" (ibid.). From these incredible challenges and "dangerous exercises of self-mastery one emerges as a different person" (ibid.) and "returns *newborn*; having shed one's skin . . . with a more delicate taste for joy, with a tenderer tongue for all good things, . . . with a second dangerous innocence in joy, more childlike, and yet a hundred times subtler than one has ever been before" (*GS* P 2:4). Slavery, in Nietzsche's view, is meant to serve this purpose.

39. Friedrich Nietzsche, *Also Sprach Zarathustra* (*Z*). Subsequent citation of *Z* is drawn from *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, trans. Walter Kaufmann (New York: Penguin Books, 1966).

40. Christa Davis Acampora, "Beyond Altruism and Cruelty: Nietzsche on the Perversions of Power and Struggle," unpublished manuscript.

41. See Cynthia Willett's account of this feature of Douglass's work in her *Maternal Ethics and Other Slave Moralities*, chapter 7, and in her *The Soul of Justice: Social Bonds and Racial Hubris*, chapter 8.

9

Masculinity and Existential Freedom: Wright, Ellison, Morrison, and Nietzsche

CYNTHIA WILLETT

What does Nietzsche mean to provoke with the enigmatic ideal of the will to power? He portrays the will to power as a lust for danger, adventure, and risk, and he does not shy away from linking this lust to the pleasure of war, or even rape. He argues that ancient warriors and heroes were driven by the lust for danger, and that this lust accounts for their vitality and creative force. While he does not aim for us to emulate these mythic characters, he does draw upon these characters to trace the roots of our fantasies and desires. But then how do we interpret the will to power as a measure of health and, in this sense, an ideal?

We can gain some sense of the will to power by thinking about the appropriate limits for cultivating and restraining its strength. Nietzsche addresses the question of limits from different perspectives throughout his writings. I shall examine these different approaches and argue that the richest notion of a limit comes from Nietzsche's study of the contest in Greek culture. While the ancient societies cultivated the will to power through contests, these contests were not without socially imposed rules or restraints. The democratic Greek populace (*demos*) condemned the unbound will as a major source of social crime and tragic error. They named this crime hubris, and they forewarned the elites of the terrible consequences of the abuse of power.

Only once does Nietzsche endorse the democratic sentiments of the Greek populace, and this is in an early unpublished essay, "Homer's Contest."[1] In the unpublished essay, Nietzsche argues that friendships

40. For an excellent study of Nietzsche's conception of race, see Gerd Schank, *Rasse and Züchtung bei Nietzsche* (Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 2000). See also "'The Great Play and Flight of Forces': Nietzsche on Race," in *Philosophers on Race: Critical Essays*, ed. Julie K. Ward and Tommy Lott (Oxford: Blackwell, 2002). See also my "Nietzsche's Racial Profiling" in *Race and Racism in Modern Philosophy* edited by Andrew Valls (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2005).

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