



# Zeitschrift für Diskursforschung

## Journal for Discourse Studies

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Carsten Junker

## Self-Aggrandizement – Discursive Effects of Early Abolitionist Self-Positioning<sup>1</sup>

**Zusammenfassung:** Der frühe Diskurs des transatlantischen Abolitionismus trug maßgeblich zur Abschaffung des Sklavenhandels im englischsprachigen Raum in den Jahren 1807/08 bei. Der Beitrag untersucht anhand einer Analyse ausgewählter Argumentationsmuster im abolitionistischen Diskurs, wie dessen Protagonisten die damalige Versklavungspraxis skandalisierten. Dabei werden Strategien der Positionszuweisung von Versklavten und Eigenpositionierungen im Diskurs als latente Funktionen des Abolitionismus herausgearbeitet. Der Beitrag zeigt auf, wie seitens der Kritiker von Versklavung ambivalente Dynamiken diskursiver Hegemonieproduktion entfaltet werden. Er zeigt, dass man eine durch dekoloniale, afro-pessimistische und queer-theoretische Ansätze geprägte diskursanalytische Lesart des Abolitionismus dabei einen üblicherweise als emanzipatorisch betrachteten Diskurs auf seine machstabilisierende Wirkungen hin lesen kann.

**Schlagwörter:** Abolitionismus, Diskurs, Sklaverei, Kritik, Subjektpositionierung, Dekoloniale Theorie, Afro-Pessimismus, Selbsterhöhung/self-aggrandizement

**Abstract:** The early discourse of transatlantic abolition contributed significantly to the abolition of the slave trade in the English-speaking transatlantic sphere in the years 1807/08. By analyzing select argumentative patterns in abolitionist discourse, the paper examines how its protagonists rendered enslavement practices scandalous. It discusses strategies of positioning enslaved as well as free speakers of abolition as latent functions of abolitionist discourse, showing that critics of enslavement developed ambivalent dynamics by which they stabilized discursive dominance. It shows that a reading informed by decolonial, Afro-pessimist, and queer-theoretical approaches can highlight how a discourse generally considered emancipatory may have effects that stabilize existing social hierarchies.

**Keywords:** abolition, discourse, slavery, critique, subject positioning, decolonial theory, Afro-pessimism, self-aggrandizement

### 1 Contextualizing the Discourse of Abolition

This contribution addresses the discourse of abolition as an object of discourse analysis. It approaches its subject matter by way of a reading informed by »decolonial«, »Afro-pessimist«, and »queer« theorizing, thus proposing to complement and open up the »post-colonial« paradigm mobilized in this topical issue of the *Journal for Discourse Studies* in specific ways. In particular, it examines late-eighteenth-century abolition in the English-speaking transatlantic sphere as a counter discourse to the colonial discourse of slavery; it is particularly interested in the role of white protagonists of abolitionist discourse

1 This contribution comes out of and presents arguments from a larger research project recently published as Junker, C. (2016): *Patterns of Positioning: On the Poetics of Early Abolition*. Heidelberg: Universitätsverlag Winter.

– contestants of the enslavement regime who were themselves free men.<sup>2</sup> As a counter discourse, abolition forms part of the late eighteenth-century apparatus of transatlantic enslavement which had been a central feature of European colonialism since the Early Modern era. While »decolonial« theory allows us to read abolition as a deliberately »decolonial« discourse during colonialism *avant la lettre*, Afro-pessimist approaches shift attention to the historical significance and epistemological repercussions of transatlantic enslavement during and after colonialism; not least, queer theory provides conceptual tools for considering the ambivalent discursive standpoints of the subjects of abolitionist discourse analyzed here.

Although the goal of early abolitionist discourse was marked by attempts both to abolish the transatlantic slave trade *and* slavery in the Americas, a strong focus lay on the former objective. The British Parliament eventually passed the Slave Trade Act in 1807 which made the slave trade illegal throughout the British Empire, and by 1808, the Congress of the United States also declared the trade in enslaved people unconstitutional. The US Act to Prohibit the Importation of Slaves did not prevent that human trafficking continued in illegal ways but, in fact, led to »an increase in the illegal slave trade captained by U.S. nationals« (Horne 2014, p. 7). Efforts to abolish the trade in enslaved Africans preceded efforts to abolish slavery proper; enslavement practices continued to be legal in the British Empire until 1833 and *de jure* slavery in the United States was only ended in 1865.

While there were early attempts to critique slavery,<sup>3</sup> we can speak of a shift from anti-slavery efforts to a viable discourse of *abolition*, which sets in only with the founding of anti-slavery societies in Britain and the United States. The formation of abolition as a discourse thus correlates with processes of anti-slavery institutionalization. The year 1787 marks the founding, in Britain, of the *Society for Effecting the Abolition of the Slave Trade*. From then on, abolitionist campaigns rapidly gathered momentum in Britain; it was around that time that the abolitionist movement »embarked on a massive propaganda campaign« (Haywood 2006, p. 14). Abolition societies were founded throughout the independent North American Colonies and the later new republic from the mid-1770 onwards. The first of its kind in North America, the *Society for the Relief of Free Negroes Unlawfully Held in Bondage*, was formed in Pennsylvania in 1775.<sup>4</sup>

- 2 Unlike numerous texts of abolitionists of African origin which could articulate the suffering of enslaved persons in first person, be it in the form of slave narratives, poetry, sermons, or others, the texts examined here speak about – and oftentimes for – the enslaved.
- 3 Brycchan Carey's *From Peace to Freedom* (2012) investigates antislavery Quaker rhetoric until the early 1760s not only in Britain but also in colonial places such as Barbados, New Jersey, and, centrally, Pennsylvania.
- 4 The society was dormant during the Revolutionary War but resumed activity in 1784 as the *Pennsylvania Society, for Promoting the Abolition of Slavery, for the Relief of Free Negroes Unlawfully Held in Bondage, and for Improving the Condition of the African Race*. According to David Brion Davis, the *Pennsylvania Abolition Society* »served as the model and inspiration for the various state societies which began in 1794 to send representatives to Philadelphia for the annual Convention of Delegates from the Abolition Societies« (1975, p. 216).

In the English-speaking transatlantic sphere, the enslavement of and trade in Africans reached a peak around 1800.<sup>5</sup> Between 1787 and 1807, the number of Africans imported as trade goods was higher than in any other twenty-year period.<sup>6</sup> As these references to numbers alone indicate, slavery as well as the struggle against it constitute a crucial element of a transatlantic history that spans the continents of Africa, Europe, and the Americas. Slavery – and thus abolition – form a constitutive part of European Modernity. For decades, eminent enslavement historians focused attention on the »*supreme paradox* that Western culture has long combined extraordinary coercion and violence with a celebration of individual freedom« (Davis 2009, p. 254, emphasis mine).<sup>7</sup> In a North American context, this translated into the formula of »The American Paradox« (Morgan 1972). As philosopher Charles Mills points out, this paradox – the supposed contradiction between freedom and slavery – was reconciled in Enlightenment and Western Modernity through what he calls the »Racial Contract« (1997, p. 63).<sup>8</sup> Toni Morrison and others in her wake have deconstructed this »supreme paradox« and argued instead for reframing and reconfiguring the relation between freedom and enslavement as constitutive for the former notion. The Enlightenment, in consequence, emerges no longer as a project faced with the supposedly (unresolved) contradiction of its ideals on the one hand and its social realities on the other. What comes into view instead is a two-sided, racialized logic, according to which slavery becomes formative for notions of freedom in Enlightenment and Western Modernity.<sup>9</sup> In the framework of decolonial theory, the constitutive logic of modernity

5 According to the *Trans-Atlantic Slave Trade Database*, the decade from 1791–1800 marked a peak in the British Caribbean, with an estimate of 322,209 disembarkations of enslaved persons; a peak on mainland North America was reached in the decade from 1801–1810 with an estimate of 87,493 disembarkations of Africans forced to undertake the Middle Passage. These estimates »provide an educated guess of how large the slave trade actually was. [...] They raise the final totals to over 12,500,000 Africans forced to undertake the Middle Passage and around 10,700,000 who completed it, the largest forced migration in modern history« (2008, 2009). See also Eltis/Richardson 2010.

6 See Kolchin (1993, p. 79).

7 Davis refers to the »Problem of Slavery« with regard to what he calls a »tension« between »the ideal and real« in Western culture – between the ideal that »no slaveholding should exist in a purely natural, i.e. sinless world« and the reality that it did. According to Davis, this assumed tension inherent in the problem of slavery rests on a »fundamental contradiction«: »The basic concept of the slave was modeled on the domesticated animal; yet the slave's master wanted and needed human capacities and abilities, which were also expressed in the slave's resistance« (2009, p. 253).

8 »[T]he golden age of contract theory (1650–1800) overlapped with the growth of a European capitalism whose development was stimulated by the voyages of exploration that increasingly gave the contract a racial subtext. The evolution of the modern version of the contract, characterized by an antipatriarchalist Enlightenment liberalism, with its proclamations of the equal rights, autonomy, and freedom of all men, thus took place simultaneously with the massacre, expropriation, and subjection to hereditary slavery of men at least apparently human. This contradiction needs to be reconciled; it is reconciled through the Racial Contract, which essentially denies their personhood and restricts the terms of their social contract to whites« (Mills 1997, pp. 63–64).

9 Recent contributions in a postcolonial framework include Carey/Festa (2009); Shohat/Stam (2012, pp. 1–25)

has been addressed, for instance, by Walter Mignolo, who considers »coloniality« as the *Darker Side of Western Modernity*.<sup>10</sup>

Since the iniquity of the transatlantic apparatus of enslavement is an unquestioned issue in scholarship, the topic of abolitionist discourse as an object of study facilitates a focus on method and conceptual framing. Eric Sundquist's contention that slavery remains »the overarching American issue [...] as memory and as unresolved social crisis« (1993, p. 11), has had consequences for the study of North American as well as global history and culture in the sense that thinking about slavery has been immensely productive for discussions of the most adequate ways in which the topic could be addressed. In the field of historiography, German historian Jürgen Osterhammel has noted that the causes for the establishment as well as the abolition of the transatlantic slave trade and enslavement in the Americas have been extensively debated over roughly the past fifty years not because there is a clash over the value judgment of slavery but rather a consensus. Since no one would defend slavery as legitimate, scholars do not have to free themselves from making this value judgment, which opens up space for controversial discussions about the most adequate ways of addressing the topic. Accordingly, Osterhammel maintains, scholarship on slavery has emerged as an unparalleled laboratory for historiographical methodology, and the formation of different theories such as cliometrics and approaches to cultural history.<sup>11</sup> This is also a valid observation for the discourse of abolition, discussed here from a perspective informed by North American Literary and Cultural Studies that seeks to analyze ways in which discursive dominance is produced. I take my cue here from Nobel price laureate and cultural critic Toni Morrison's call for a reversal of perspectives. Morrison (1992, p. 90) famously sought »to avert the critical gaze from the racial object to the racial subject; from the described and imagined to the describers and imaginers; from the serving to the served«.

## 2 Reflections on Methodology: Patterns of Positioning the Free and the Unfree

While it is unproblematic today to assert that discourse analysis has provided scholars of literary and cultural studies as well as other fields in the humanities with preeminent

10 Mignolo decidedly differentiates his decolonial perspective from the postcolonial paradigm, see his »Further Thoughts on (De)Coloniality« (2014, pp. 21–22).

11 I have paraphrased from the German original: »Da niemand die Sklaverei auch nur andeutungsweise verteidigt, bedarf es nicht der Suche nach Werturteilsfreiheit. Ein eindeutiger Wertekonsens öffnet Raum für Erkenntnisfortschritt und Kontroverse. Die Debatten werden deshalb so stürmisch ausgetragen, weil sich Deutungsalternativen ungewöhnlich klar entwickeln lassen. Anders gesagt: Die Sklavereiforschung ist zu einem unvergleichlichen Laboratorium für die geschichtswissenschaftliche Anwendung oder gar Bildung von Theorien geworden. Nicht von ungefähr sind die Kliometrie, d.h. die modellbildende quantitative Wirtschaftsgeschichte, und die eigentlich gar nicht so neue ›Kulturgeschichte‹ auf diesem Feld maßgeblich entwickelt worden« (Osterhammel 2009, pp. 37–38).

tools to examine text-based phenomena such as the discourse of slavery and its counter discourse of abolition, it seems necessary to make a proviso here and ask: can slavery merely be analyzed as a discourse? For Michel Foucault, a discourse can be understood as »a regulated practice that accounts for a certain number of statements«; it points to a phenomenon of »things actually said« (1972, pp. 80, 127).<sup>12</sup> A discourse is based on utterances and made up of discursive »events« that are formalized in spoken or written form:

»[The domain of discourse] is constituted by the set of all effective statements (whether spoken or written) in their dispersion as events and in the immediacy that is proper to each. [...] Discourse [...] is the always-finite and temporally limited ensemble of those statements alone which were formulated. [...] The description of discourse asks [the] question: How is it that this statement appeared, rather than some other one in its place?« (Foucault 2003, pp. 306–307)

Beyond a consideration of abolition as discourse, which can account for the »things actually said« about it, we should also note that there are dimensions of abolition that point beyond its discursive manifestation. Abolition as well as slavery are more than discourses – systems of the said and sayable – of opinions and formulated statements. They are systems that regulate geographical spaces, bodies, instruments, capital, and so on. Applying Foucault's thought to the present context,<sup>13</sup> the constellations that constitute the enslavement regime and its critique can also be conceptualized as an »apparatus« (in French, »dispositif«). In an interview from 1977, Foucault notes:

»What I'm trying to pick out with this term is, firstly, a thoroughly heterogeneous ensemble consisting of discourses, institutions, architectural forms, regulatory decisions, laws, administrative measures, scientific statements, philosophical, moral and philanthropic propositions-in short, *the said* as much as *the unsaid*. [...] The apparatus itself is the system of relations that can be established between these elements. Secondly, what I am trying to identify in this apparatus is precisely the nature of the connection that can exist between these heterogeneous elements. [...] In short, between these elements, whether *discursive* or *non-discursive*, there is a sort of interplay of shifts of position and modifications of function which can also vary very widely. Thirdly, I understand by the term »apparatus« a sort of-shall we say-formation which

12 For a discussion of Foucault's notion of the »things actually said« and its implications for discourse analysis, particularly in linguistic discourse analysis, see Warnke 2013.

13 This context is marked by slavery and abolition as well as colonialism and concomitant racism. As Ann Laura Stoler (1995, pp. 55–94) and Robin Blackburn (1997, p. 13) have critically noted, Foucault did not attend »sufficiently to the colonial state as a source of racism,« arguing that »the slaveowner, even prior to the colonial state, actually claimed most of [racism's] regulatory powers« (Blackburn 1997, p. 26n15). In spite of such critique, Foucault's theorizing and its concomitant terminology has fundamentally shaped scholarship on slavery and racism, see Hartman (2007 p. 129). Foucault addressed racism in his 1976 lectures at the Collège de France as the unequal biopolitical distribution of life and death (2004, pp. 239–264).

has as its major function at a given historical moment that of responding to an urgent need. The apparatus thus has a dominant strategic function. This may have been, for example, the assimilation of a floating population found to be burdensome for an essentially mercantilist economy.« (Foucault 1980, pp. 194–195, emphases mine)

Giorgio Agamben, who provides a slightly different translation of passages of this interview, summarizes three crucial points of Foucault's concept of the apparatus:

- »a. It [the apparatus] is a heterogeneous set that includes virtually anything, linguistic and nonlinguistic, under the same heading: discourses, institutions, buildings, laws, police measures, philosophical propositions, and so on. The apparatus itself is the network that is established between these elements.
- b. The apparatus always has a concrete strategic function and is always located in a power relation.
- c. As such, it appears at the intersection of power relations and relations of knowledge.« (Agamben 2009, pp. 2–3)

We can transfer this notion to transatlantic enslavement, which can thus be considered an apparatus that extends beyond a discursive frame to include non-discursive elements at a given historical moment. In the sense that abolition questioned and challenged the apparatus of enslavement, abolition can be considered part of this apparatus. Like slavery, abolition is not only discursive or cannot merely be located in discourse, it also includes non-discursive elements. However, the apparatus of enslavement was largely contested using discursive means, and – without losing sight of the fact that the enslavement regime went far beyond »the said« – this realization draws analytical attention to abolition *as* discourse and as a discursive element of a larger framework of the apparatus of enslavement.<sup>14</sup>

Examining abolition as a discourse allows us to raise crucial questions of power as they are expressed in the validation of (shared) knowledge and the distribution of speaking positions, among others: who is in a position to speak and set the terms for debate? Literary Studies scholar Dwight McBride has similarly argued for the epistemic value of construing abolition as a discourse: »Recasting the abolition debate in terms of a discourse usefully places central significance on the issues of language, rhetorical strategy, audience, and the status and/or production of the ›truth‹ about slavery« (2001, p. 1).

As an exemplary object of (de)colonial discourse analysis, the discourse of abolition posits and tackles two fundamental positions marked by a difference between life and death: the position of the free and the position of the unfree. The following exemplary close readings of a small section of a much larger archive of abolitionist texts propose

14 We may argue with Foucault that abolition is a discourse resistant to the apparatus of enslavement. It occupies points of resistance in a field of power: »Where there is power, there is resistance, and yet, or rather consequently, this resistance is never in a position of exteriority in relation to power« (Foucault 1990, p. 95).



how these fundamental positions are negotiated and unequally distributed between white abolitionist speakers and the enslaved. My central question here is: how do abolitionist speakers as subjects of abolitionist discourse assign the enslaved positions in this discourse? To answer this question, I will focus on a select number of argumentative patterns, which I also call *topoi* – recurrent units of argumentation realized in various sequences of abolitionist writing. Argumentative patterns point to the negotiation of various kinds of knowledge which is explicitly or implicitly shared by a community of abolitionist speakers at a given time.<sup>15</sup> Argumentative patterns are evident in a wide range of discursive fields including religious, political and moral philosophical, economic, historic, national, and racializing discourses. They may predominantly refer to and address the free, oftentimes attacking slaveholders, yet they may also predominantly refer to the enslaved. Thus they may implicitly or explicitly assign the enslaved different positions in abolitionist discourse.

*Topoi* imply *and* evoke discursive positions of the unfree. These positions are not necessarily explicated but can be implicated in an argument. They are presuppositions of the argument; that is, they are necessary preconditions for its truth function. An argument counts as valid when it tacitly assumes the existence of these positions. The *topos* of ANIMALIZATION examined below, which implies a position of »abjection« for the enslaved, is a telling example.<sup>16</sup> Had those who argued that slavery was a regime treating human beings like animals not assumed the dehumanizing effects of this treatment to be the case, the argument – and its conclusion that slavery must be abolished – would not count as valid. Such an argument refers to a putative position of dehumanization. At the same time, it has declarative power. It is an argument against the animalization of the unfree, yet it references this position and in this way, it may reproduce a belief that this position is thinkable for the enslaved in the first place. This is a central ambivalence inherent in argumentative sequences of abolitionist discourse: they articulate positions of the unfree that they presume exist in order to reject them, and – by describing these positions – they assert declarative power, participating in the reproduction of the assumption that these positions are indeed thinkable although they are considered worthy of rejection. The inquiry in the following section is thus motivated by an interest in assessing the strategies

15 For a concise methodological reflection on *topoi* in discourse analysis, see Wengeler (2007), who proposes the analysis of *topoi* in a given discourse to gain insights into the explicit and implicit negotiation and production of shared bodies of knowledge.

16 The term »abjection« derives from Julia Kristeva's psychoanalytic work. In her study *Scenes of Subjection*, Saidiya Hartman uses the term in racially coded ways, transferring it to debates that took place following the Civil War and the formal abolition of slavery in the US in 1865. These centered on anxieties of whites, who asked, »how might this free laboring class be incorporated in the body politic as citizens while maintaining the integrity of whiteness?« (1997, p. 162). Notions of an assumed »threatening physical presence of blackness« among whites denote, as Hartman contends, »the *abjection* of blackness and the ambivalent character of the abject exemplified by the conflicted and uncertain incorporation of black citizens into the national body and by the containment or expulsion of blackness required to maintain the integrity of whiteness« (p. 163, emphasis mine). See also Broeck (2014, p. 110).

of positioning the enslaved in discourse and in the frees' tacit and shared yet contested knowledge about the enslaved.

### 3 Abolitionist Topoi: A Sequence of Close Readings

Considering topoi as discursive units of abolitionist discourse allows for an inquiry not only into the patterns of argument abolitionists chose, but also into the positions they accorded the unfree in their discourse. My assumption here is that abolitionists mobilized their listeners' tacit and shared knowledge about the enslaved when they utilized topoi.<sup>17</sup> In some cases abolitionists assumed that the unfree could speak for themselves (thus positioning the unfree as subjects of discourse); in others, they felt the needed to speak on behalf of the unfree, thus imagining the enslaved in a position in which they needed to be spoken for and therefore speaking about them (thus implying that the enslaved were objects of discourse); and still in other cases, abolitionists assumed that the enslaved could not feature as (potential) agents in this negotiation of freedom and unfreedom (and thus relegating the unfree to a position abjected from discourse). The question of discursive positioning has implications that extend beyond a postcolonial Spivakian theorization of a subaltern inability to speak, or rather, to be heard.<sup>18</sup> It raises the question of whether the enslaved were given or denied access to a modern social and symbolic order around 1800 that negotiated, regulated, and enabled social relations. It has conceptual effects that concern the positioning of the enslaved inside or outside a realm of recognizable social »relationality« (Wilderson 2011, p. 11) – of human relations and thus humanity at large; it also permits an examination of how white abolitionists negotiated their own positions in debates over the freedom of the enslaved.

#### 3.1 Subject Positioning: The Topos of FELLOW FEELING

The topos of FELLOW FEELING considers slavery as a regime the cruelty of which can be imagined by enslavers through fellow feeling, thus warranting its abolition. Abolitionists made use of this topos to call on their readers to consider what it might feel like for them to be enslaved. It is grounded on the assumption that an imaginary reversal of positions between the free and the unfree was possible since both groups could putatively inhabit subject positions. The topos was oftentimes argued on religious grounds as it was closely tied to the idea of an innate equality between the free and the enslaved in the eyes of God, which also articulates the Golden Rule, according to which we should treat others as we want them to treat us. Quaker abolitionist Anthony Benezet (1713–1784) takes up the argumentative strategy of reversing positions in his anti-slavery treatise *A Caution and*

17 On »Race«, Racism and Tacit Knowing,« see Paul (2014).

18 The metaphor of speaking used here owes to Gayatri Spivak's notion of the inability of the »subaltern« to speak, that is to say, to be heard. See Spivak (1988).

*Warning to Great-Britain, and Her Colonies* from 1767. He quotes seventeenth-century Quaker George Fox, founder of the Quakers, the Religious Society of Friends, who argued in 1671:

»Consider with yourselves, if you were in the same Condition as the Blacks are, – who came [as] Strangers to you, and were sold to you as Slaves; I say, if this should be the Condition of you or yours, you would think it hard Measure: Yea, and very great Bondage and Cruelty. And, therefore, consider seriously of this, and do you for and to them, as you would willingly have them, or any other, to do unto you, were you in the like slavish Condition [...].« (quoted in Benezet 1767, pp. 39–40)

A reversal of positions as is suggested here allows for the possibility of FELLOW FEELING. It has to be noted, however, that Benezet's exercise in role-play is one-directional only. It allows him to suggest that the free can potentially feel what it means to be enslaved. It does not involve him and his audience imagining the enslaved in the position of the free.

In his essay »African Slavery in America« (1775), Thomas Paine (1737–1809),<sup>19</sup> in contrast, suggests that a dynamic of a reversal of positions in both directions can be fathomed by asking whites to imagine what it would feel like to be unjustly enslaved by the unfree, who are imagined here as enslavers:

»Is the barbarous enslaving our inoffensive neighbours, and treating them like wild beasts subdued by force, reconcilable with all these divine precepts? Is this doing to them as we would desire they should do to us? If they could carry off and enslave some thousands of us, would we think it Just? – One would almost wish they could for once; it might convince more than reason, or the Bible.« (Paine 1775, p. 54)

Paine seems to articulate his wish that the enslaved »could for once« enslave some thousands of free people somewhat hesitantly, as its modal framing – »One would almost wish« – suggests; however, his plea also expresses urgency, as he posits that neither religious law nor reason-based secular law have yet made the abolitionist impact that Paine so desperately desires to see – agency on the part of the enslaved here becomes the last resort in the struggle for emancipation. When Paine maneuvers his audience into imagining a reciprocal dynamic via role-play, he implies that the enslaved can feature as subjects in the discourse of abolition. He imagines the unfree as agents in the sphere of human interaction.

The exhortation to imagine such a reversal of positions would of course entail that de-facto power constellations could be suspended. It is a radical exercise and, in light of existing power relations, a futile one at that. Paine does not only *not* point out that the enslaved are structurally positioned in ways that make them incapable of enslaving whites. We might go so far as to assume that Paine, in effect, produces an argumentative lacuna that

19 Thomas Paine was raised as a Quaker, as his father's side of the family were Quakers; see Claeys (1989, p. 20).

in itself is expressive of discursive power. Blending out the fact that the enslaved are in no position to even consider the reversal of positions a viable option thus constitutes an act of white discursive self-empowerment, an act that veils the consequences of the disempowerment of the enslaved within the apparatus of enslavement.

A further example is provided from John Wesley's (1703–1791) religious treatise *Thoughts Upon Slavery*, published in London in 1774 and reprinted in Philadelphia the same year.<sup>20</sup> In this passage, the cofounder of Methodism does not discuss the enslavement regime installed in the Americas, but focuses on the torture to which the enslaved were subjected during their passage across the Atlantic. Wesley scolds slave-ship captains for their lack of compassion for the enslaved in direct terms of address:

»Are you *a man*? Then you should have an [sic] *human* heart. But have you indeed? What is your heart made of? Is there no such principle as compassion there? Do you never *feel* another's pain? Have you no sympathy? No sense of human woe? No pity for the miserable?« (Wesley 1774, p. 52)

In a subsequent passage, Wesley goes on to address slave-trading merchants with a short but remarkable imaginary anecdote about a slave in the slave port of Liverpool who is so bold as to ask a merchant to fathom what it might feel like if their positions were reversed:

»Master,[<] (said a slave at *Liverpool* to the merchant that owned him) ›what if some of my countrymen were to come here, and take away my mistress, and master *Tommy*, and master *Billy*, and carry them into our country, and make them slaves, how would you like it?‹ His [the merchant's] answer was worthy of a man: ›I will never buy a slave more while I live.‹ Oh, let this resolution be yours! Have no more part in this detestable business.« (Wesley 1774, pp. 53–54)

In this scene, Wesley imaginatively inverts power structures; a slave engages a slave merchant, demanding his accountability and requesting that the merchant imagine himself in the position of a slave. In this reversal and reconfiguration of positions, the enslaved are not only spoken about but speak for themselves as subjects, and speak truth to power. In the following passage, Wesley suggests a belief in the agency of the enslaved but he does so in more subtle ways than Paine, calling on God to mobilize the enslaved and bring about their freedom:

»Arise and help these that have no helper, whose blood is spilt upon the ground like water! Are not these also the work of thine own hands, the purchase of thy Son's blood? Stir them up to cry unto thee in the land of their captivity; and let their complaint come up before thee; let it enter into thy ears! Make even those that lead them away captive to pity them, and turn their captivity as the rivers in the south. O burst

20 *Thoughts* went through thirteen editions, which goes to show that it was circulated widely and was immensely popular; see Jackson (2009, p. 321n98).

thou all their chains in sunder; more especially the chains of their sins: Thou, Saviour of all, make them free, that they may be free indeed!« (Wesley 1774, pp. 56–57)

Wesley thus transfers the responsibility for freedom to God but he recognizes that the enslaved would be able to make a forceful – and legitimate – complaint on their own behalf if God helped them. Wesley's call to God for what could be construed as the audibility of the enslaved expresses a critique that the »complaint« of the enslaved had previously remained unrecognized by a wider public. It is obviously directed at the free, which is also substantiated by Wesley's invocation that God help them to pity the enslaved. Wesley, then, mobilizes the topos of FELLOW FEELING by arousing white pity and mingling that sentiment with the fear among the free about the complaints of the enslaved. Unlike the previous passages by Benezet and Paine, Wesley does not arrive at fellow feeling by proposing his own variant of an imagined reversal of positions. Instead, he offers a radical religious vision of broken chains and redeemed sins, inviting his readers to »feel« this vision. Even though Wesley's imagination invests the enslaved with a certain capacity to act on their own terms, it largely keeps them suspended in the power of a common God.

Paradoxically, the topos of FELLOW FEELING keeps the enslaved in a position in which they are felt for even as it envisions them as fellow subjects on their own, irrespective of how whites relate to them. Presbyterian minister Samuel Miller (1769–1850) echoes his abolitionist predecessors' arguments in a more political-philosophical framework in *A Discourse, Delivered April 12, 1797, at the Request of and before the New-York Society for Promoting the Manumission of Slaves, and Protecting Such of Them as Have Been or May Be Liberated*.<sup>21</sup> Miller ultimately maintains a (nationally and racially coded) difference between »us« and »them« – and it is precisely this difference that allows for the possibility of imagining the enslaved as agents in their own right who might as well enslave whites. Miller thus reassigns positions of subjugation, imagining the enslaved in a position in which they would have the power to exert force and enslave whites in reverse:

»Were it made a question, whether justice permitted the sable race of Guinea to carry us away captive from our own country, and from all its tender attachments, to their own land, and there enslave us and our posterity for ever; – were it made a question, I say, whether all this would be consistent with justice and humanity, one universal and clamorous negative would show how abhorrent the principle is from our minds, when not blinded by prejudice.« (Miller 1797, p. 16)

Like other abolitionists before him, Miller depicts a hypothetical reversal of positions, which points to the complicated dynamics at play in the discursive positioning of the unfree and the free in abolitionist debates over slavery and freedom. The assumption that the enslaved could take on a position which whites inhabit in the power constellations marked by slavery is expressive of a white abolitionist fantasy grounded in the belief that

21 Miller's *Discourse* was delivered two years before the state of New York passed a law providing for the gradual abolition of slavery.

the enslaved could equally be in possession of freedom and that their humanity was an inalienable condition irrespective of white power. This fantasy of autonomous Black subjecthood – a subjecthood existing in and by itself – unmarks and un-names the structural relation between positions available to the enslaved and white subjects respectively. Because it suspends a consideration of power relations between the free and the unfree and evades a critique of existing constellations of power that also existed between the enslaved and abolitionists, it becomes a potentially delusive (if unwilling) gesture of white abolitionist disavowal. As such, the enabling fantasy of a reversal of positions constitutes an act of discursive self-empowerment on the part of white abolitionists with which they stake out claims to discursive dominance in the public arena of the new US republic.

### 3.2 Object Positioning: The Topos of REVENGE

An argumentative pattern such as FELLOW FEELING posits humanity as an inalienable property that is presupposed to derive from within human beings regardless of their actual status as enslaved or free persons; white abolitionist speakers who mobilized this argumentative pattern believed that both enslaved and freed Blacks might – at least potentially – inhabit subject positions in the discourse of abolition and, in effect, positioned them this way. They considered the unfree to be subjects on their own, regardless of their own relation to whites. At the same time, my discussion of FELLOW FEELING has shown that the topos in effect reveals a paradox: white abolitionist speakers can only imagine the enslaved in subject positions independent of white positions when, at the same time, they un-name the hierarchical relations endemic in the structural setup of a slave-trade system and a plantation society that they argue should be overcome.

The following section examines the topos of REVENGE, which positions the enslaved differently by assigning them discursive positions of the OBJECT of abolition. It does not consider the enslaved as capable of taking the place of an *I* in discourse, but instead assigns them a position of *you*. The topos of REVENGE argues for the abolition of slavery on the grounds that enslavement practices imply the risk of revenge on the part of the enslaved and in this way invoke fears of insurrections among the free. First, the abolitionists who employed this topos spoke *about* or *for* the enslaved, thus placing them in an object position. Second, in less formal and more propositional terms, the topos engages the question of abolition in ways that position the enslaved as objects of discourse vis-à-vis a constituency of whites regardless of the latter's attitude toward enslavement. This topos of REVENGE does not merely position the enslaved as objects in debates over abolition, it also reinforces the position of white subjectivity as the central source of abolitionist knowledge. It constitutes abolition as a discourse of white self-referentiality. This notion is corroborated by abolition scholar Maurice Jackson when, with reference to Quaker abolitionist Benezet, he succinctly notes that Benezet appealed to »the physical well-being of whites in terms of fears of potential slave uprisings« (2009, pp. 158–159). This raises questions as to the effects that the topos of REVENGE had for those speakers who mobilized it with regard to their own positioning in abolitionist discourse.

As John Stauffer reminds us, »the fear of an insurrection and the tacit acknowledgment that slavery represents a state of war« were among the »central component[s] of white abolitionist thought from the beginning of the abolition movement to the Civil War« (2003, pp. 2–3). The topos of REVENGE may be considered the secular version of a more religiously motivated topos of DIVINE RETRIBUTION, where revenge is registered as an act of God that does not fall within the purview of the enslaved themselves. It perhaps challenges more than any other the (Quaker) doctrine of nonviolence. By acknowledging the fear and perhaps legitimacy of insurrections as secular events, the religious frame of reference is stretched to its limits. Depictions of the Haitian revolution as »Non-Christian Abolition« (Avalos 2011, p. 275) are telling in this regard.

While the centrality of Haiti is relevant in terms of its significance as a singular historical place, uprisings on the part of the enslaved can be noted for their frequency and thus matter-of-factness in the North American setting during the eighteenth century.<sup>22</sup> Spectacular modes of punishment were legalized to contain them:

»Slave rebellions [...] were usually punished with extreme cruelty. New York, for example, passed a law justifying any mode of execution which was deemed an appropriate spectacle of deterrence: this could include burnings, breaking on the wheel and hanging women in front of men« (Haywood 2006, p. 32).

Wesley describes these torture practices in the Caribbean as well as in the North American colonies with precision. He shows that such punishment, which was designed as preventative measure against escapes and other acts of resistance to enslavement, was not only illegitimate and excessive, but also expressive of the fear of revenge among slaveholding societies. Quoting Virginian law, he writes:

»Nearly allied to this [situation in Jamaica and Barbados] is the law of *Virginia*: ›After proclamation is issued against slaves that run away, it is lawful for any person whatsoever to KILL AND DESTROY such slaves, by SUCH WAYS AND MEANS AS HE SHALL THINK FIT.[¶] We have seen already some of the ways and means which have been *thought fit* on such occasions. And many more might be mentioned. One gentleman, when I was abroad *thought fit* to roast his slave alive! But if the most natural act of ›running away‹ from intolerable tyranny, deserves such relentless severity, what punishment have these *law-makers* to expect hereafter, on account of their own enormous offences?« (Wesley 1774, p. 33)

22 An organized resistance movement among the enslaved in the French colony Saint Domingue, which later became the first Black republic, Haiti, had started there in 1791. On the Haitian Revolution, see Geggus (2001). In his recent study, Horne (2014) posits that the Haitian Revolution and further slave resistance movements in the North-American, Circum-Atlantic sphere laid ground for the founding of the United States. Horne reads the American Revolution as a counter-revolutionary reaction to slave resistance, arguing that the American Revolution was fought to a large extent to gain freedom to consolidate the apparatus of enslavement in the future US republic.

The typography and punctuation here reveal Wesley's outrage in light of the excessive torture practices that were supposed to contain resistance on the part of the enslaved. Wesley considered acts of escape a »most natural act« (p. 33). In this section, he mobilizes the topos of REVENGE to speak about the enslaved, but the point is that he shifts attention to the laws that vindicate punishment, exposing their scandalous nature and labeling the acts of punishment that they allow whites to perform on Blacks as morally reprehensible.

The famous lexicographer Noah Webster (1758–1843), who was a lawyer by training, published an abolitionist treatise titled *Effects of Slavery on Morals and Industry* in 1793 that features accounts of insurrections on the part of the enslaved as results of slavery. His evocation of the fear of disaster held by a white audience oscillates between a mobilization of the topos of DIVINE RETRIBUTION and REVENGE. Considering the treatment of the enslaved, Webster argues, it is to be expected that the »keen sense of the injuries« to which the enslaved are subjected provokes their resistance; violent forms of expressing this resistance simply correspond to the dehumanizing severity of the slave regime:

»From the universal depravity of slaves, form a keen sense of the injuries they suffer and a strong desire of revenge, have sprung numerous insurrections, which have frequently deluged whole countries in blood. Hardened by severe labor, exasperated insults, disciplined in cruelty, and armed with despair [sic], they become doubly ferocious; and their insurrections are marked with more than savage barbarity.« (Webster 1793, p. 14)

Webster's *Effects* is a succinct example of abolitionist writing that uses rational arguments and mobilizes feelings among its audience. While the passage quoted above reflects the rational tenor of Webster's arguments, the following passage shows a sudden change in stylistic register. Webster frames the following account of insurrections in emotional language. Perhaps these lines are suffused with affective-laden references to the »passions of men« because he aims to elicit an emotional response on the part of his audience; perhaps these lines also speak to the limits of a rational use of language, pointing to the difficulties of putting into words the effects of the terrors of the apparatus of enslavement on those it terrorized:

»The passions of men resemble the current of a majestic river, which while it meets with no resistance, glides smoothly on, silent and harmless; attacked with boisterous winds, it moves with sullen dignity, heaving its murmuring waves against the resounding shores; but when massy mounds impede its progress, it rises in all its force, and busting its banks with indignant fury, it spreads wide havoc and devastation over the adjacent plains – Such have been the ravages committed by slaves, when, unable any longer to bear the pressure of their bondage, despair has roused their spirit to bust their fetters asunder, and they have risen in myriads to avenge their wrongs.« (Webster 1793, p. 14)



This figurative coding of human passions through the use of simile («a majestic river») trumps the sober tone of the remaining narration, the reference of which are the recent insurrections in the Caribbean. Webster anticipates an emotional reaction on the part of his audience and reverts to an imaginative use of language when he reaches the limits of what his audience may potentially be capable of imagining. Webster goes as far as to claim that the horrors from slave insurrections are too horrible to relate:

»A history of the calamities and dangers which nations have suffered by the revolt of their slaves, would teach us a most useful lesson; but the recital in detail would fill the mind with horror. A few instances only will be here added to the black catalogue of public and private evils flowing from the practice of enslaving men which this essay is intended to exhibit.« (Webster 1793, p. 14)

The imagery of the above two passages is noteworthy with regard to narrative perspective as well: the trope of flood, which in all likelihood refers to the story of the Great Flood in the Bible (Genesis 1), permits Webster to stage a scene of divine retribution, a passage that may even express a kind of pleasure in, or even desire for catastrophe among the free, an overindulgence in self-made disaster that comes across as a God-given punishment in response to the actions of white men. Webster here seems to foment a fear of insurrections that indicates a white will to indulge in disaster. It is the white subject – Webster stands in metonymically for those whom he addresses – that comes under the threat of slavery and its destructive effects, and it is also the white subject that has the power to fear suffering, that is in a position to be thrilled by excitement about danger in the first place. As bearers and experiencers of such affects, whites retain a subject position of abolitionist discourse. At the same time, the enslaved are relegated to a position from where they merely execute acts of revenge against the injustice of slavery. They are provisionally granted the role of agents of revenge, but they are vested with power to act on their own terms only provisionally. Their actions remain reactions to white injustice, the causes of which, in Webster's logic, only whites can ultimately abolish. While Webster's account of slave insurrections thus retains a focus on white accountability and agency, W.E.B. Du Bois – perhaps the utmost influential African American intellectual of the twentieth century – would recast patterns of positioning in abolitionist discourse. Not only claiming to speak from the position of a Black subject himself but validating the very own perspective of the enslaved throughout history, Du Bois would argue that »slave uprisings signified the indomitable spirit of Africa which refused to submit to the European yoke« (Haywood 2006, p. 32).

While my readings in the previous two sections have examined how speakers use the topos of FELLOW FEELING and REVENGE to envision and position the unfree in the discourse of abolition as its speaking subject and its spoken-for and spoken-about object, the following topos of ANIMADVERSATION locates them as dehumanized beings outside and beyond social relations, addressing them as cast out from intra-human interaction and abjected from discourse. Taking these different strategies of positioning the enslaved together, we can speak of a *triadic* mode of positioning the unfree in the discourse of abolition.

### 3.3 Object Positioning: The Topos of ANIMALIZATION

In his study *Slavery and Social Death* (1982), Orlando Patterson noted the exposure of the enslaved to gratuitous violence, their general dishonor and their genealogical isolation as constitutive elements of the master-slave relationship: this was marked by »the permanent violent domination of natively alienated and generally dishonored persons« (p. 13). Hortense Spillers conceptualized the captive body of the enslaved as »flesh,« succinctly defined as »the zero degree of social conceptualization,« which entails a complete decoupling of the cultural, historical, and familial ties of enslaved people and a concomitant erasure of their intelligibility as gendered subjects (2003, p. 206). Following suit, scholars such as Saidiya Hartman, Frank Wilderson, and Jared Sexton have produced work currently coagulating into a paradigm of ›Afro-pessimism‹. Decades earlier, in his decolonial *Discourse on Colonialism* (1950), Aimé Césaire had succinctly addressed the dehumanization and commodification of colonized, enslaved persons in the European project of colonization, which he identified as »thingification«:

»I spoke of contact. Between colonizer and colonized there is room only for forced labor, intimidation, pressure, the police, taxation, theft, rape, compulsory crops, contempt, mistrust, arrogance, self-complacency, swinishness, brainless elites, degraded masses. No human contact, but relations of domination and submission which turn the colonizing man into a classroom monitor, an army sergeant, a prison guard, a slave driver, and the indigenous man into an instrument of production. My turn to state an equation: colonization = ›thingification‹.« (Césaire 1950, p. 21)

Abolitionist texts showed evidence of such processes of thingification. Benezet, for instance, quotes from an account that decries the atrocious cruelties of the slave trade and the resulting forms of human deprivation on American plantations: »The Iniquity of the Slave-trade is greatly aggravated by the Inhumanity with which the *Negroes* are treated in the Plantations, as well with Respect to Food and Cloathing, as from the unreasonable Labour which is commonly exacted from them« (Anonymous, qtd. in Benezet 1767, p. 8). Benezet substantiates his critique of such procedures of dehumanization by quoting from numerous authoritative eyewitness accounts, one of which is provided by a white observer who recounts the gratuitous violence to which the enslaved are constantly exposed:

»A considerate young Person, who was late in one of our West-India Islands, where he observed the miserable Situation of the *Negroes*, makes the following Remarks: ›I meet with daily Exercise, to see the Treatment which these miserable Wretches meet with from their Masters, with but few Exceptions. They whip them most unmercifully, on small Occasions. They beat them with thick Clubs, and you will see their Bodies all whaled and scarred; in short, they seem to set no other Value on their Lives, than as they cost them so much Money; and are not restrained from killing them, when angry, by a worthier consideration, than that they lose so much. They act as

though they did not look upon them as a Race of human Creatures, who have Reason, and Remembrance of Misfortunes, but as Beasts, like Oxen, who are stubborn, hardy, and senseless; fit for Burdens, and designed to bear them. They won't allow them to have any Claim to human Privileges, or scarce, indeed, to be regarded as the Work of God[<].« (Anonymous, quoted in Benezet 1767, pp. 6–7)

The account documents practices of dehumanization and shows that the value of the lives of the enslaved was measured by their exchange value as tradable goods, and further, that they are vulnerable to unwarranted acts of violence. Not only does the observer point to the defenselessness of the enslaved here, he also mobilizes a topos of ANIMAIIZATION when he uses a simile to describe the treatment to which slaveholders subject their human property, noting that they act toward the enslaved as if they were »Beasts« or »Oxen« – the connectives »as« and »like« are the rhetorical markers that express the comparison and, on the part of slaveholders, the assumed likeness of the enslaved and livestock, a proximity that abjects the former from the sphere of the human. They are, to repeat from the quoted source above, refused »any Claim to human Privileges« (p. 7). In a further quote from a 1739 letter by George Whitefield (1714–1770), a Calvinistic Methodist, Benezet provides another example of the use of simile to express and decry the ANIMALIZATION of the enslaved:

»[S]ure I am, it is sinful, when bought, to use them as bad, nay worse, than as though they were Brutes; and whatever particular Exception there may be (as I would charitably hope there are some) I fear the Generality of you, that own *Negroes*, are liable to such a Charge; for your Slaves, I believe, work as hard, if not harder, than the Horses whereon you ride[<].« (Whitefield, quoted in Benezet 1767, p. 12)

Whitefield uses direct terms of address in order to hold slaveholders accountable for their »response-ability« to use Toni Morrison's term (1992, p. xi), for the animalization of the enslaved. In this passage, the simile operates on two levels: first, when Whitefield makes the claim that slaveholders treat them as »Brutes« and second, when Whitefield himself assumes that the enslaved are made to work »as hard, if not harder,« than horses. This example shows the dilemma abolitionist discourse faced: how to avoid reproducing what it wished to denounce. Another example for such a reenactment of ANIMAIIZATION through simile – for the predicament of reproducing the discursive terms of abjection in the name of criticizing them – is provided by Wesley when he writes: »It [slavery] allows the master to alienate the slave, in the same manner as his cows and horses« (p. 4). Thomas Jefferson's (1743–1826), *Notes on the State of Virginia* (1787) are another case in point. When the third US president discusses the sexual preferences of the enslaved, he places people of African origin in proximity to animals:

»Add to these, flowing hair, a more elegant symmetry of form, their own judgment in favour of the whites, declared by their preference of them, as uniformly as is the preference of the Oranootan for the black women over those of his own species. The cir-

cumstance of superior beauty, is thought worthy attention in the propagation of our horses, dogs, and other domestic animals; why not in that of man?» (Jefferson 1787, pp. 145–146)

Jefferson constructs an analogy between ›inter-species‹ desire on the one hand and an ›interracial‹ desire on the part of Blacks for whites on the other. While Jefferson remains unspecific in terms of gendered orientation, the analogy to the Oranootan would suggest that he speaks about Black men desiring white women, as this would constitute a more threatening scenario for his white audience in terms of racially coded »mixture« (ibid., p. 151). Furthermore, the status of enslaved women as property meant that their sexual exploitation did not even constitute a transgression on the part of white men. The comparison between the assumed desire of the orangutan and that of the enslaved moves the latter close to the sphere of animals, furnishing them with animalistic characteristics. It thus takes part in their animalization. While Jefferson's text overall ponders the abolition of slavery, it clearly mobilizes the topos of ANIMAUZATION here for the purpose of rehearsing notions in the field of what he calls »natural history« which essentialize assumed physical differences and thus legitimize social exclusions (ibid., pp. 150–151).

In Benjamin Franklin's (1706–1790) »An Address to the Public« from 1789, a more decidedly abolitionist speaker speaks to his fellow abolitionists *for* the enslaved *about* their plight, seeking a consensus among his audience through an appeal to compassion and sympathy. Yet Franklin underlines this aim by associating the effects of slavery with similes between the enslaved as »brute animals« »galling in chains« and, in another passages, as »mere machines«. He thus positions the enslaved on a vertical axis at the limits of the human, at a boundary to putative savage animalism and materiality:

»The unhappy man, who has long been treated as a brute animal, too frequently sinks beneath the common standard of the human species. The galling chains, that bind his body, do also fetter his intellectual faculties, and impair the social affections of his heart. Accustomed to move like a *mere machine*, by the will of his master, reflection is suspended; he has not the power of choice; and reason and conscience have but little influence over his conduct, because he is chiefly governed by the passion of fear.« (Franklin 1789, p. 384, emphasis mine)

Slavery, according to the polymath Franklin, forces the enslaved outside the social network of human relations, relegating them to the status of sub-humans or even »beneath the common standard of the human species«. It destroys their intellectual and affective faculties. When Franklin speaks about the impairment of »the social affections of his [the slave's] heart« (ibid., p. 384), Franklin essentially claims that affections have a social function; they bind together a social community and contribute to negotiating this community's shared sense of right and wrong, alongside the capacities of reason and reflection. Enslavement practices, Franklin argues, diminish, damage, and destroy any potential »social affection« on the part of the enslaved, but they are left only with what Franklin

calls the »passion of fear« (ibid.). In this case, Franklin implies a gradation from animalization toward thingification, suggesting the existence of a hierarchy of different kinds of feelings. Some feelings indicate the (violated) humanity of the enslaved, some impact on the enslaved in ways that pose a potential threat to white civil society. While Webster above validates fear as a serious feeling among whites that supports the need for abolition, the reference to fear here merely seems to point to and validate the assumption of an uncultured reflex among the enslaved.

Samuel Miller makes use of the topos of ANIM ALIZATION to suggest a scale of successive stages of dehumanization, showing that effects of animalization may reach degrees of thingification. Miller differentiates between more or less dehumanizing conditions under slavery, particularly with respect to the Northern and Southern states. He emphasizes, however, that slavery incurs the same violation of the right to personal freedom no matter how it is imposed. Choosing a somewhat odd comparison between the freedom that »the barren rock« (Miller 1797, S. 17) can enjoy yet which the enslaved are forced to surrender, Miller exposes the absurdity of slavery as institutionalized human deprivation:

»That there are different degrees of wretchedness among them, in different circumstances, no one can doubt: and when they fall into the hands of the humane and kind, their depression is less – far less miserable, than when the torture of whips, the pains of hunger and nakedness, and the unreasonable impositions of hard task-masters, are added to servitude. On this account, I am happy in being able to say, that the lot of slaves among us is, in general, much more tolerable than that of those in some other parts even of our own country. But still they are both in bondage. However favoured the situation of either, they are both deprived of that blessing, in possession of which the barren rock has its joys, and without which Eden itself would be a gloomy scene« (Miller 1797, S. 17).

As this image suggests, rocks here enjoy more liberty than the enslaved; the latter are thus symbolically reduced to a state less than animate beings; in a natural order the enslaved occupy a position below that of rocks. Miller's may use the topos of ANIM ALIZATION here in ways that remonstrate against the necropolitical dimensions of the apparatus of enslavement; yet the use of such a topos may in fact, unintentionally, consolidate a rupture between the free and the unfree.

#### 4 Self-Aggrandizement: The Manifest and Latent Functions of Abolitionist Discourse

Abolition is generally construed as selfless because abolitionists sought to sensitize readers to the plight of the enslaved in order to ameliorate the conditions under which they lived. In contrast, the exemplary passages examined above suggest that we identify a paradox between manifest and latent functions and a resulting need to examine both at a

more fundamental level.<sup>23</sup> Abolitionists employed a variety of strategies – among them the use of recurring topoi – to achieve their goal of generating widespread public disapproval of slavery. However, mobilizing abolitionist sentiments among their audience did not necessarily follow altruistic motives; addressing the plight of the enslaved should also be considered in terms of the effects this had for those who did the addressing. As an analysis of the topoi of early abolitionist discourse shows, their use could, in fact, be self-referential and ultimately self-serving. Abolition was not as selfless as it was made out to be by abolitionists themselves (and also by later scholars of abolition).

Some topoi were clearly, intentionally self-referential, such as the argument about REVENGE and its implied interest in political stability and social peace. Intertwined with these were other, more subtle and more pernicious strategies that claimed to focus on the enslaved but were, in fact, no less self-referential and self-serving, for instance references to Black ANIMAZION and further discussions of inequality that reified existing power hierarchies even as white abolitionists claimed to condemn them. Discursive acts in which the abjection of the enslaved is moved to center stage harbor obvious ambivalences which lie in the predicament of reconsidering, and thus reproducing the terms of abjection for the sake of condemning it. Abolitionists frequently used the discursive norms which rendered the enslaved abject; thus the discourse of abolition could coerce the enslaved into the measures of abjection it sought to critique. Abolitionists, in brief, addressed the position of the enslaved to criticize the structural inequality between the free and the unfree. But their powerful speech acts had effects that were potentially detrimental to an agenda geared toward overcoming structural inequality because they had the potential to reify structural inequality on a discursive level.

Paradoxically, such an ambivalent dynamic cannot only be observed where abolitionists addressed the objectification or even abjection of the enslaved, but also where they sought to frame the enslaved as subjects of discourse. While abolitionists may have mobilized this discursive procedure to empower the enslaved, it could also invite audiences to ignore existing structures of domination. The topos of FELLOW FEELING with its assumptive logic of a possible reversal of positions between the enslaved and their enslavers is but one example which shows that white abolitionists could disregard the fact that the enslaved were in no position to enslave whites. These fantasies of reversing power structures can be read as articulations of a willful ignorance concerning the power dynamics operative in the apparatus of enslavement and the societal structures of the early US republic among the protagonists of abolition. This ignorance is in itself an expression of the discursive power which abolitionists brought to bear on the enslaved. It is part of a discursive dynamic, the effect of which contributed and enabled the self-aggrandizement of abolitionist speakers in the discourse of abolition.

23 Sociologist Robert Merton expands on the concepts of »manifest« and »latent« functions as follows: »This is the rationale for the distinction between manifest functions and latent functions; the first referring to those objective consequences for a specified unit (person, subgroup, social or cultural system) which contribute to its adjustment or adaptation and were so intended; the second referring to unintended and unrecognized consequences of the same order« (1968, p. 117). For a discussion of these concepts in the framework of discourse analysis, see Spitzmüller/Warnke (2011, p. 50).

Ultimately, the assumed public benefit of the abolition of the slave trade did not contradict the personal self-aggrandizement of abolitionists. Abolition, accordingly, presented the abolitionists with multiple benefits: they could take the moral high ground with regard to enslavement beneficiaries and their ilk, and they could occupy a favorable position toward the enslaved whom they claimed to want to rescue. While this allowed them to argue in favor of abolition, it also served their own religious, political, and moral goals.

## 5 Decolonial Theory, Queer Theory, and Afro-pessimism

To conclude, let me briefly highlight what specific theoretical framings can add to a discourse analysis of early abolition that directs attention away from the enslaved to those who occupy a speaking position in it. When Quaker abolitionist protagonists such as Anthony Benezet and John Woolman (1720–1772) chose to refuse participation in the apparatus of slavery on the assumption that, as Woolman noted in 1754, »Enslavement corrupts the mind« (pp. 6–7), their refusal to let slavery corrupt them could be considered, in the language of decolonial theory, an enactment of a »decolonial option« (Mignolo 2011, p. 34).<sup>24</sup> Framing such enactments as acts of »delinking from the colonial matrix of power« (ibid., p. 74) and as acts of »epistemic disobedience« (ibid., p. 139) *avant la lettre* allows for a reconsideration of the ways in which abolitionists are discursively implicated in the »coloniality« that Mignolo considers the constitutive »darker side of modernity« and Enlightenment, of which the violent dehumanization of the enslaved forms a part (ibid., p. 2).

Here questions of the discursive framework and the addressees of abolitionist discourse come into play. Benezet, among others, »added Enlightenment philosophy [...] to the Atlantic antislavery discourse« (Jackson 2009, p. 55): if we consider abolition not only to address specifically the practices of enslavement – not merely the particulars of the historical apparatus of enslavement – but also assume that abolitionist discourse can be situated and found itself in conversation with the universalism of Enlightenment thinking which it partly contested, then the meaning of »epistemic disobedience« shifts. Here, a concept from queer theory such as Muñoz's concept of »disidentification« may also serve as a useful tool for an analysis of abolitionists' subject positions.<sup>25</sup> Without seeking to de-

24 Mignolo himself relates the concept of the »decolonial option« retrospectively to an eighteenth-century setting when he mentions Ottobah Cugoana – the African abolitionist born in present-day Ghana who, after he had been enslaved and deported to the Antilles, eventually became a prominent, free abolitionist in Britain – as one of its early proponents who claimed that »no human being has the right to dominate and be imposed over [an]other human being« (2011, p. 23).

25 With reference to performance culture among »queers of color,« José Esteban Muñoz's notion of »disidentification« offers a critical perspective on the ways in which the emergence of »disidentificatory identity performances [...] is predicated on their ability to disidentify with the mass public and instead, through this disidentification, contribute to the function of a counterpublic sphere« (1999, p. 7). At the same time, I expressly wish to state that I do not assume an analogy between white eighteenth-century abolitionists and those who perform the »politics of disidentification« (p. 22) which Muñoz analyzes.

referentialize Muñoz's concept, I contend that its assumptive logic may open up unusual perspectives on the dynamics of early abolitionist discourse and its discursive practices. Abolitionists like Benezet emerge as »[s]ubjects who are outside the purview of dominant public spheres« negotiating dominant versions of rational Enlightenment thought, contesting its ideals of liberty and equality (Muñoz 1999, p. 8).

As a third horizon of theorization, Afro-pessimist theorizing provides discourse analysis with the conceptual tools that help to establish an understanding of the complexities of Black subjection beyond its conceptualization within a too facile subject-versus-object dichotomy in the framework of white hegemony. Conceptualizing white practices of anti-Black abjection beyond a potential recovery of Black agency illuminates the ways in which the discourse of abolition addresses and reifies processes of commodification. Such processes are constitutive for the apparatus of enslavement and its concomitant assumptions of white freedom.

Concepts and approaches from Afro-pessimist theory, as well as decolonial and queer-of-color critiques plainly analyze power structures and, to varying degrees, assess strategies for overcoming them. Thus, these theories not only contribute to analyzing the procedures of investing and divesting different speaking positions in a discourse such as early abolition with authority. They also open up new perspectives onto early abolition and other discourses of emancipation by investing a consideration of such liberationist discourses with questions of the constitutive role of (discursive) violence that is at the heart of debates of freedom and humanity in the late-eighteenth century and beyond. These approaches thus also open up the »postcolonial« paradigm by way of highlighting the significance of transatlantic enslavement as a constitutive aspect of colonial history; they offer specific conceptual tools for assessing the epistemological implications of the enslavement regime for our »postcolonial« moment.

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