Douglass, Jacobs, and Freedom Found in Resistance

Colleen Margaret Malley

Thesis submitted to the faculty of the Virginia Polytechnic Institute and State University
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

Master of Arts
In
Philosophy

Philip Yaure, Chair
Jordan MacKenzie
Gil Hersch

April 5, 2022
Blacksburg, Virginia

Keywords: political philosophy, black abolitionist thought, freedom, history of ethics

Douglass, Jacobs, and Freedom Found in Resistance

Colleen Margaret Malley

ABSTRACT

The narratives of abolitionist thinkers Frederick Douglass - *My Bondage and My Freedom* - and Harriet Jacobs - *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* - both include instances of the authors engaging in resistance against their slaveholders that do not free them from slavery. I begin with these narratives of resistance and make the interpretive claim that both Douglass and Jacobs took themselves to be free in their acts of resistance even though they were still in conditions we would not associate with freedom. In doing so, I determine that Douglass takes himself to be free because he is able to regain an internal sense of self-respect. Differently, I argue that Jacobs takes herself to be free because she is able to exert control over her material circumstances by identifying and pursuing her goal of sexual and reproductive autonomy to the best of her ability. This difference in understanding of freedom is surprising since Douglass and Jacobs find themselves in similar situations. I proceed by addressing this surprise and making the claim that the form of freedom Jacobs found in resistance is preferable to the form of freedom found by Douglass. In order to make this claim I draw on Isaiah Berlin's discussion of freedom in "Two Concepts of Liberty" and find that Douglass achieves a form of freedom that isolates himself from his external desires whereas Jacobs does not. Jacobs' act of resistance is tightly connected to her desires. I demonstrate that connection to desires in resistance is important because it allows an agent to develop a sense of practical agency which allows them to adapt to future circumstances. Jacobs' understanding of freedom is ultimately preferable because it tells us what it is like to find freedom in our immediate circumstances through persistence.

Douglass, Jacobs, and Freedom Found in Resistance

Colleen Margaret Malley

GENERAL AUDIENCE ABSTRACT

It might seem unusual to think of ourselves as being free when we are in circumstances where we are clearly dominated, interfered with, and unable to act according to our will. However, in this paper I argue that this occurs in the narratives of abolitionist thinkers Frederick Douglass - *My Bondage and My Freedom* - and Harriet Jacobs - *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl.* This paper is - in part - an attempt to understand what Douglass and Jacobs could possibly mean when they say they are free even though they are not in conditions we would typically associate with freedom. I proceed by demonstrating that Douglass finds freedom because he is able to regain his sense of internal self-respect while isolating himself from the consequences of his act of resistance. Jacobs finds freedom in a different way. To Jacobs, freedom means exerting control over her conditions in a way that brings her material circumstances closer to what she desires - even if the result is imperfect. This difference in the meanings of freedom is surprising because it highlights just how rich and complicated freedom found in resistance is. After establishing this, I then transition to addressing if one form of freedom is preferable to another. I argue that the form of freedom Jacobs found in resistance is preferable to the form of freedom found by Douglass. I draw on the literature to demonstrate that the form of freedom found by Douglass is internal, individual, and achieved by Douglass giving up the things he desires. Differently, Jacobs' act of resistance is tightly connected to the things she desires. I demonstrate that connection to desires in resistance is important because it allows an agent to develop a sense of practical agency which is a quality that allows them to adapt their actions to future circumstances by taking both their desires and conditions into account. Jacobs' understanding of freedom is ultimately preferable because it tells us what it is like to find freedom in our immediate circumstances through persistence.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

To my parents - Kathy and Ross - for supporting me and always encouraging me to pursue what I love even when the path was unexpected.

To the professors at Virginia Tech who have offered nothing but support and guidance. I have learned so much from all of you. I am deeply indebted to Philip Yaure for meeting with me weekly to develop this project. Additionally, I am thankful for Karen Kovaka and Jordan MacKenzie for being some of my very first supporters in philosophy and who have been role models for me both in and out of the classroom.

To the friends who helped me develop the ideas in this thesis in conversation and encouraged me greatly when I was stuck - Brandon Burkey, Dane Stocks, and many more.

To my dear friends at Feast and Company - Matty, Kasey, Sean, and Laina - who have provided me with great support over the years and who were always there to listen to me talk about school and encourage me. I am forever grateful for the community you welcomed me into.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

I. Introduction

The narratives of abolitionist thinkers Frederick Douglass - *My Bondage and My Freedom* - and Harriet Jacobs - *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* - feature a common thread. Both Douglass and Jacobs have instances where they engage in acts of resistance against their oppressors and from an outside perspective it appears that they do not become free from these acts. However, their narratives say otherwise. By examining their narratives, I make the interpretive claim that both Douglass and Jacobs take themselves to be free in their acts of resistance even though they have not achieved conditions that we would typically associate with freedom. My paper begins with this question: What could Douglass and Jacobs possibly mean when they say they are free? Or, more precisely: What could it possibly mean for someone to be free when she is subject to robust forms of interference and domination, and prevented from self-actualization?

This interpretive claim leaves an explanatory puzzle. It is hard for us to articulate what is going on in these instances because both Douglass and Jacobs take themselves to be free even though they are dominated and interfered with. Additionally they do not seem to have a meaningful sense of positive freedom because they do not gain the ability to do more things according to their will as a result of their resistance. This paper continues by addressing this explanatory puzzle and addressing the question of what Douglass and Jacobs mean when they say they have found a sense of freedom in the act of resistance itself.

So, not only do Douglass' and Jacobs' narratives tell us that they go about finding freedom in different ways but they also demonstrate that Jacobs and Douglas mean two different things when they say "freedom." These differences in freedom in the analogous situations of Douglass and Jacobs demonstrate that the idea of becoming free in resistance is rich and complicated. Investigating this explanatory puzzle can help us to gain insight into the different forms of freedom that can be found in resistance depending on the particular actions and circumstances the person resisting oppression is faced with. This complexity leads to the final question I address in the paper. Namely, is one way of thinking about freedom in resistance preferable to another? I conclude by making the

normative claim that the type of freedom found by Jacobs is preferable to the type of freedom Douglass found. Unlike Douglass, I argue that Jacobs fully engages with her desires when engaging in resistance in order to shift her material conditions to more closely reflect them.

To address these questions, the paper proceeds as follows. I begin by outlining Douglass' mode of resistance outlined in his narrative and establish that Douglass takes himself to be both free and dominated through his act of resistance. Then I transition to a discussion of what type of freedom Douglass found in resistance. After establishing that Douglass found a form of freedom focused on his internal sense of self and that was necessarily divorced from his desires, I transition to a critique of his account. I argue that Douglass' account of freedom is similar to the type of freedom criticized by Isaiah Berlin in "Two Concepts of Liberty." I demonstrate that Douglass finds an inadequate form of freedom emulating the agent Berlin criticizes who aims to find freedom by "retreating to the inner citadel".[1] I argue that by "retreating" in this manner, Douglass divorces himself from his desires and finds a weak form of freedom.

After evaluating Douglass' account, I transition to focusing on Jacobs. I first outline the type of resistance she engaged in and establish that like Douglass, she took herself to be free even though she was still dominated. I then establish that she found herself to be free because she was connected to her desires when she resisted by trying to establish control over her material circumstances. I then evaluate her account and argue that she offers a preferable account of finding freedom in resistance because she is connected to her desires in resistance unlike Douglass. I argue that connection to desires in resistance is important because it allows the agent to gain an important sense of agency. To demonstrate this, I sketch a positive account of practical agency and conclude by demonstrating that Jacobs is able to achieve this important form of agency by engaging in resistance. By fostering this form of agency, Jacobs is ultimately able to provide a stronger account of finding freedom in resistance than Douglass.

---

[1] page 11, Berlin, Isaiah. Two Concepts of Liberty: An Inaugural Lecture **Delivered Before** the University of Oxford on 31 October 1958. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1958.

II. Douglass

a. Douglass Becoming Free in Resistance

To first understand how Douglass was able to realize freedom in resistance, it is necessary to examine the particular instance of resistance that this paper addresses: Douglass' fight with Covey. While there are many instances of resistance from Douglass' life, his act of physical resistance against Covey while enslaved is cited by him as a pivotal point in his "life as a slave".[2]

In this episode, Douglass returns to Covey - a notorious "breaker" tasked with forming Douglass into a subservient worker for his master - after a brief time where he had escaped.[3] Douglass began his act of resistance by defensively avoiding Covey's attempts to injure him. This effort to defend himself against Covey quickly turned into an even fight between Covey and Douglass. Douglass describes his actions early in the fight by stating, "I flung him [Covey] to the ground several times, when he meant to have hurled me there. I held so firmly by the throat, that his blood followed my nails".[4]

Through Covey's taunts and continued escalation of the fight, Douglass remained steady in his resolve to continue resisting. In *My Bondage and My Freedom*, he describes the continued fight as follows.

> "I told him "I did mean to resist, come what might;" that I had been treated like a brute by him, during the last six months; and that I should stand it no longer. With that, he gave me a shake, and attempted to drag me toward a stick of wood, that was lying just outside the stable door. He meant to knock me down with it; but, just as he leaned over to get the stick, I seized him with both hands by the collar, and, with a vigorous and sudden snatch, I brought my assailant harmlessly, his full length, on the not over clean ground—for we were now in the cow yard."[5]

Douglass continues to persist against Covey and is able to defeat him after about two hours of fighting.[6] After the fight, Douglass expresses that through this act of

---

[2] page 155, Frederick Douglass. *My Bondage and My Freedom*, ed. Nick Bromell and R. Blakeslee Gilpin in Norton Critical Edition. (New York, NY: W.W. Norton and Company, 2021)
[3] page 132, *Bondage*
[4] page 153, *Bondage*
[5] page 154, *Bondage*
[6] page 155, *Bondage*

resistance he has gained a sense of freedom.[7] He states that he became a "freeman in *fact*, while [he] remained a slave in *form".*[8] When a slave cannot be flogged he is more than half free."[9] The immediate material result of Douglass' altercation with Covey was that he no longer was subject to violence at the hands of Covey, he was no longer "flogged".[10] It is clear from this excerpt that Douglass believes to have found a form of freedom in resistance.

This ultimately raises the question of what Douglass means when he states that through resistance he has become a "*freeman* in fact".[11] Freedom gained as a result of resistance is generally thought of in terms of non-domination. However, Douglass does not gain a sense of true non-domination through this act of resistance even though he is - by his own account - able to gain a sense of freedom that he finds personally valuable. He states that he is able to become a "freeman in *fact*" but also remains a "slave in *form*" which upon first impression seems contradictory.[12]

Through this, Douglass clearly acknowledges that even though he was successfully able to gain a sense of freedom in resistance, the result of his act was not to diminish the domination that Covey had over him. In fact, Douglass recognizes that Covey still has the ability to not only continue to physically assault him but also the ability to have him publicly whipped and killed under Maryland law.[13] He can only offer guesses as to why Covey chose not to have him punished in these ways. Douglass' best suggestion is that, "Covey was, probably, ashamed to have it known and confessed that he had been mastered by a boy of sixteen" but this does not change the fact he is still under Covey's control.[14]

Douglass recognizes his luck that the act of resistance did not result in further harm towards himself and that he is still dominated by Covey. As previously stated he is

---

[7] paraphrase, page 155-156, *Bondage*
[8] page 156, *Bondage*
[9] page 156, *Bondage*
[10] page 156, *Bondage*
[11] page 156, *Bondage*
[12] page 156, *Bondage*
[13] page 156, *Bondage*
[14] page 156, *Bondage*

a, “slave in form”.[15] With all this being said, Douglass takes himself to have found a form of freedom in the act of resistance itself. From this, it is evident that Douglass did not consider freedom in this instance to be non-domination.

b. Douglass’ Freedom in Regaining Self-respect

Let’s take a closer look at exactly what sort of freedom Douglass found. Douglass does not consider the freedom he found in resisting Covey to be contingent on gaining non-domination because he acknowledges that he is “still a slave in *form*”.[16] However, it is still unclear what freedom means to Douglass in the aftermath of his fight with Covey. In particular, it is important to understand what Douglass means when he states that he is a “freeman in *fact*”.[17] In order to understand this, I begin the section by examining the motivation behind resisting and also his immediate reflection on the act of resistance.

Douglass states that his motivation for resisting is the diminished sense of self-respect he feels as a result of Covey’s violent, abusive treatment. When describing working under Covey to “break” a group of oxen, Douglass notes his similarity to these animals.[18] He states:

> “I now saw, in my situation, several points of similarity with that of the oxen. They were property, so was I; they were to be broken, and so was I. Covey was to break me, I was to break them; break and be broken — such is life.”[19]

In this passage it is clear that under Covey Douglass feels devoid of self-respect. Under Covey’s control, Douglass no longer regards himself as a man. Rather, he regards himself as an animal that, while once strong, has been “broken” and turned into a docile creature subject to the whims of its controller. To consider oneself as subhuman and akin to an animal is to entirely lack self-respect as Douglass - in this passage - expresses that he does not think of himself as any higher than a working animal.

---

[15] page 156, *Bondage*
[16] page 156, *Bondage*
[17] page 156, *Bondage*
[18] page 136, *Bondage*
[19] page 136, *Bondage*

The first piece of evidence that speaks to Douglass' motivation to engage in physical resistance is what he regards as Covey's intent when harming him. In general, Douglass expresses that the focus of Covey's violent and physically demanding tactics was not to simply punish him physically nor was it to simply extract as much work out of Douglass as possible. Rather, much of Covey's violent tactics were oriented towards diminishing the self-esteem of Douglass. Douglass explains that, "Frequent as the lash was used, Mr. Covey thought less of it, *as a means of breaking down my* [Douglass'] *spirits*, than that of hard and continued labor."[20] By aiming to break down Douglass' spirit in this manner, it is clear that Covey's violent assaults were aimed at exerting control over Douglass' physical body and his own sense of self.

Douglass reports that Covey did successfully "break down" his self-respect. This is evident from both his comparison of himself to an ox under Covey's control and to his later reflections prior to deciding to engage in resistance. Douglass describes his state as, "humbled, degraded, broken down, enslaved, and brutalized" by Covey.[21] The level of degradation that Douglass experiences under Covey directly reflects the control that Covey had over Douglass. Not only does Covey dictate his actions under him due to his position of power over Douglass but, he also clearly has control over Douglass' sense of self respect.

Covey's control over Douglass' sense of self-respect is made clear when Douglass is determining whether or not to return to Covey's prior to engaging in resistance. Douglass states that he was forced to choose between starving or returning to Covey's to have his "spirit humbled under the cruel lash of Covey."[22] Here, it is evident that the emphasis of the harm done by Covey is on Douglass' "spirit" and self-esteem.[23] Like the oxen referenced earlier in the account, Douglass feels as if he is a mere animal under total control of another man - Covey. If Douglass were to regain self-respect then, it is clear from his description that he would have to feel validated in his personhood and no longer

---

[20] page 137, *Bondage,* emphases mine
[21] page 142, *Bondage*
[22] page 149, *Bondage*
[23] page 149, *Bondage*

feel as if he is an animal whose every thought and action are controlled by another. Upon reflecting on this psychological harm done to him by, Douglass pledges to himself to "stand up in [his] own defense" when faced with further assaults from Covey.[24] By pledging to stand up for himself in this manner, Douglass indicates that he would like to regain some degree of control over his circumstances.

In addition to establishing the motivation Douglass has for engaging in resistance, it is also important to examine his reaction after resisting Covey because this provides insight into what Douglass valued about his act of resistance. Notably, after defeating Covey, Douglass reports an immediate increase in his self-respect. He states:

> "It [engaging in resistance] rekindled in my breast the smoldering embers of liberty; it brought up my Baltimore dreams, and revived a sense of my own manhood. I was a changed being after that fight. I was *nothing* before; I WAS A MAN NOW. It recalled to life my crushed self-respect and my self-confidence, and inspired me with a renewed determination to be a FREEMAN."[25]

Prior to engaging in resistance, Douglass experiences diminished self-respect from Covey's violent, physical assaults. As mentioned, Douglass no longer felt like a person with the ability to exert control over his circumstances. Covey's treatment relegated him to feeling like a "docile" and "broken" animal.[26] There is a large contrast between Douglass' feelings of self-esteem before and after engaging in resistance. Douglass was motivated to resist Covey to regain the sense of self-esteem he had lost during the "mental experience" he had at the hands of Covey.[27] Where Covey had made Douglass feel like "nothing"and even like an animal, Douglass is able to become a "man" in resisting.[28] By regaining his "crushed self-respect" and his "self-confidence" in this act of resistance, Douglass is able to effectively fulfill his desired goal of increasing his self-esteem by standing up to Covey.[29] This increase of self-respect reflects the fact that

---

[24] page 153, *Bondage*
[25] page 155, *Bondage*
[26] page 136, *Bondage*
[27] page 136, *Bondage*
[28] page 155, *Bondage*
[29] page 155, *Bondage*

Douglass was able to gain some level of control over his circumstances. While he was still dominated physically by Covey, in regaining his self-respect Douglass is able to free himself from Covey's control over his own feelings about himself. Where the experience of Covey's violence had once made him long to be an ox, Douglass is able to become free in resistance by regaining control by becoming a "man" in his own eyes once again.

Support for my claim that Douglass found freedom by regaining his self-respect is found in his discussion of the aftermath of the fight. While Douglass acknowledges that he experiences less interference by Covey following his act of resistance, this is not the primary focus of his discussion. Previously, I established that Douglass' motivation to resist was to regain his internal sense of self-respect. Douglass did not resist in order to prevent physical harm or prevent Covey from ever harming him again. If Douglass' aim in resisting was to prevent further physical harm then, it is likely that resisting in any form was not the optimal strategy. This is recognized in the following passage from "The Fight with Covey" by Bernard Boxill. Here, Boxill states that:

> "But self-defense may end in defeat and further abuse, not death or escape. There may, in fact, be no way to avoid abuse. In such circumstances the absolute duty of self-defense cannot depend on its consequences but on the fact that it is a way to show allegiance to the principles of morality."[30]

Here, Boxill recognizes that Douglass does not engage in resistance through self-defense in order to avoid abuse or in order to reap beneficial consequences. Rather, Douglass engaged in resistance to "show allegiance to the principles of morality" which - under Boxill's interpretation of Douglass - is connected to self-respect.[31] Boxill's interpretation supports my claim that Douglass engaged in resistance to regain an internal sense of self-respect and not a change in material circumstances. My reading of Douglass adds to Boxill's account because I establish a relationship between self-respect and finding freedom in resistance under Douglass' account.

Since Douglass is not motivated by the material consequence of avoiding physical

---

[30] page 9, Bernard Boxill. "The Fight with Covey." In A Political Companion to Frederick Douglass, 61– 83. Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 2018.

[31] page 6, page 9, Boxill

violence, it would not make sense for Douglass to think about freedom in resistance as something that comes from avoiding this harm. This is further supported by Douglass' own reflection on the events. He states that he "had reached that point, at which I was *not afraid to die*".[32]

By reaching this point, Douglass expresses that regaining self-respect regardless of the external consequences was more important than the consequences of his act of resistance. In resolving to stand up for himself in this manner, Douglass is able to find a sense of freedom. So, even though the consequences of Douglass' resistance did improve his material conditions, this is not what Douglass holds as the primary outcome of resisting.

c. Douglass "retreating to the inner citadel"

The prior sections established two things. First, I demonstrated that Douglass took himself to be free even though he was still dominated after engaging in resistance. I then established that Douglass took himself to be free because he was able to regain his self-respect. With these established, I will now use Isaiah Berlin's "Two Concepts of Liberty" to evaluate the efficacy of Douglass' account of freedom. The third section of this essay, "The Retreat to the Inner Citadel", provides a framework that I utilize to begin this analysis. Using this framework, I demonstrate that the account of freedom offered in Douglass' narrative of resistance is subject to the same criticism that Berlin raises in this section.

This section develops a strategy of attempting to find freedom that Berlin refers to as the "retreat to the inner citadel'.[33]An agent who engages in this strategy aims to achieve a type of "self-emancipation"where the external forces of the world no longer interfere with their choices.[34] Berlin notes that agents who choose this method of engaging with the external world often do so as a result of being subject to "exceptionally

---

[32] page 155, *Bondage*

[33] page 11, Two Concepts of Liberty

[34] page 11, Two Concepts of Liberty

arid, cruel, or unjust" circumstances.[35] The strategy of withdrawing into oneself is described in the following passage.

> "The tyrant threatens me with the destruction of my property, with imprisonment, with the exile or death of those I love. But if I no longer feel attached to property, no longer care whether or not I am in prison, if I have killed within myself my natural affections, then he cannot bend me to his will, for all that is left of myself is no longer subject to empirical fears or desires. It is as if I had performed a strategic retreat into an inner citadel — my reason, my soul, my 'noumenal' self — which, do what they may, neither external blind force, nor human malice, can touch. I have with drawn into myself; there, and there alone, I am secure." [36]

The central criticism Berlin offers to this strategy of finding freedom focuses on an agent's desires. Berlin argues that an agent who "retreats into the inner citadel" in this manner finds a weak form of freedom because they are entirely divorced from the things they desired prior to engaging in resistance.

This description of "draw[ing] into [one]self" should appear very familiar.[37] I claim that Douglass' account of finding freedom through finding self-respect is an example of this strategy outlined by Berlin. Douglass effectively retreats to his "inner citadel" to become free even though by all appearances, he is still dominated by Covey.

To demonstrate this, I will begin by showing that Douglass clearly sees himself as being free in resistance even as he gives up his desires. After defeating Covey, Douglass states that, "[He] had reached the point, at which [he] was no longer afraid to die".[38] Douglass resolves to continue to physically resist Covey and other violent oppressors no matter what the outcome or consequence is to himself.[39] To Douglass, death would be better than continuing to be degraded by Covey. Boxill, in "The Fight with Covey" defends this view by explaining that after engaging in resistance against Covey, Douglass deemed self-defense necessary to maintain self-respect.[40] In order for Douglass to maintain the freedom he found in gaining self-respect he had to continue resisting,

---

[35] page 12, Two Concepts of Liberty
[36] page 10, Two Concepts of Liberty
[37]page 10, Two Concepts of Liberty
[38] page 155, *Bondage*
[39] paraphrase, page 155, *Bondage*
[40] paraphrase, Boxill, The Fight with Covey

regardless of the outcome. Although Douglass does find control over something by resisting Covey, the thing he finds control over - his sense of self and his self-esteem - does not provide him with any real autonomy over his circumstances because the type of freedom he finds is divorced from his material desires.

A critic of my argument may - correctly - point out that Douglass' specific act of resistance is clearly physical and directed externally towards Covey. With this in mind, it is unclear how Douglass could possibly be "retreating to [his] inner citadel" if his action is directed outwards. Nothing about Douglass' choice to engage in a physical fight with Covey is oriented inwards. So, it may appear at first glance that Douglass does not face the problem of being disconnected from one's desires Berlin raises when he discusses "retreating" in this manner.[41] Intuitively, Douglass desires to be free and he desires to be freed from the violence he experiences by Covey. If you think that Douglass engages in physical violence to free himself from Covey by directly responding to his physical attacks then, you may think that Douglass is entirely connected to his desires when he resists Covey.

However, textual evidence from Douglass' account of the fight demonstrates that this reading is inaccurate for two reasons. The first reason this is incorrect is the fact that Douglass does not engage in a fight with Covey with the explicit intention of escaping his current situation as a slave. Rather than intending to beat Covey and escape, Douglass enters the fight with the sole intention to "stand up in [his] own defense."[42] In fact, in the beginning of their altercation Douglass does not even attempt to physically injure Covey and get the upper hand in the fight. Rather, Douglass maintains on the defensive.

Choosing to engage with Covey was not about directly injuring him or about offensively attacking him with the intention to escape. Rather, Douglass follows through on his personal promise to "stand up in [his] own defense."[43] This becomes even more clear considering Douglass' description of the fight where he explains that he only overpowered Covey when, for his own safety, it was necessary because Covey "meant to

---

[41] page 10, "Two Concepts of Liberty"
[42] page 153, *Bondage*
[43] page 153, *Bondage*

have hurled" him to the ground.[44] If Douglass chose to engage in resistance by fighting with Covey to gain freedom from his current set of circumstances or with the express intention of injuring Covey, then he would have approached the fight offensively.

By purely engaging in defensive behavior for much of the fight, it is clear that Douglass fights Covey for reasons that are internal to himself: his vow to stand up for himself. Berlin explains that an agent who "retreats to the inner citadel" to find freedom focuses on "[their] reason, [their] should, [their] 'noumenal' self" rather than their material circumstances.[45] By engaging in the fight with Covey and maintaining a defensive position, Douglass demonstrates that he is focusing on these aspects of his internal self. Rather than focusing on the specific set of circumstances he finds himself in and the potential to harm Covey and escape present, Douglass engages in his act of resistance by focusing on his internal sense that he ought to "stand up" for himself.[46]

By following through on his promise to "stand up in his own defense" Douglass is able to revive his "sense of… manhood" and "rekindled in [his] breast the smoldering embers of liberty".[47] Although the result of his act of resistance was positive and was oriented towards Covey, Douglass is entirely unconnected from these facts. Rather, he focuses on fulfilling his internal vow to himself and values the impacts that the fight has on his sense of self.

Since I have established that Douglass takes himself to be free while also acknowledging that he is divorced from his desires, I will now present the specific desires Douglass reports giving up. Under Berlin's account an agent "retreats to the inner citadel" only if they give up specific desires in order to find freedom. If Douglass were to simply have no articulated desires and engage in resistance against Covey then, his act of resistance would not be a case of "retreating". However, textual evidence supports my claim that this is not the case and that Douglass' account of becoming free in resistance against Covey qualifies as a case of "retreating into the inner citadel".

---

[44] page 153, *Bondage*
[45] page 10, Two Concepts of Liberty
[46] page 153, *Bondage*
[47] pages 153 and 155, Bondage

Douglass' reaction to his experiences under Covey provides a basis for believing that this is his strategy for attaining freedom. At one point, Douglass is able to briefly escape from Covey and thinks about attempting to escape but, he realizes that this is futile. The geography of the area makes this impossible. Douglass would - if he attempted to escape - end up drowning since he was surrounded by water or areas visible by the men sent after him by Covey.[48] The only choice Douglas had was to retreat back to Covey's even though he clearly desired escape.

When he returns to Covey, Douglass proceeds to resist Covey by fighting him. It is clear that Douglass resists in a way that yields a positive outcome - regaining control over his sense of self-respect. However, returning to Covey and fighting him does not appear to be Douglass' preferred choice. Since he takes the time to evaluate the potential outcomes of escaping and realizes that the geographical location of his hiding spot makes escape impossible, it is reasonable to think that Douglass would have preferred to escape instead of returning and fighting Covey.

It may be intuitive that attempting to find freedom by engaging in an act of violence against Covey is not the clearest path to gaining freedom. After all, Douglass risks his physical safety and remains dominated by Covey even after he wins the fight.[49] If Douglass had been able to escape and had been able to reach safety then, he would not have been subject to Covey's domination at all. So, textual evidence establishes that Douglass gave up the desire to escape in order to become free in his act of resistance.

The fact that this act of resistance does not promote Douglass' safety provides additional support for my claim that Douglass finds freedom by "retreating" in this manner. Berlin regards the strategy of "retreating to the inner citadel" as a weak form of finding freedom because the agent must give up their preferred desires about their situation.[50] Retreating from the realities of the world, from your own oppression is not an acceptable substitute to realizing autonomy over your own circumstances. This is due to the fact that the "retreat to the inner citadel" as described by Berlin occurs when an agent

[48] page 150, *Bondage*
[49] page 153, *Bondage*
[50] page 10, Two Concepts of Liberty

who aims to find freedom divorces her acts of resistance from her desires.

Douglass' contemplation of escape from Covey and his reflection on the physical condition he is in after experiencing assaults by Covey reflect his desire to achieve a reality where Covey no longer physically dominates him. He clearly desires to no longer be subject to his control. However, his act of resistance does not accomplish it nor is it even oriented toward fulfilling these desires.

Upon his return to Covey's, Douglass - a religious man - expresses that he is no longer concerned with what his religious views say about engaging in violent resistance nor is he concerned about the consequences his religious views say that violence has. He is unconcerned with the eternal consequences that, to him, were very real. He describes this shift by stating, "My religious views on the subject of resisting my master, had suffered a serious shock, by the same persecution to which I had been subjected, and my hands were no longer tied by my religion."[51] This shift in Douglass is a strong indication that the type of freedom he soon finds is realized through retreating to his "inner citadel".[52] By shirking his tightly held religious views, Douglass demonstrates that he no longer cares about his fears or his previous beliefs and desires. Douglass once desired to follow his religious beliefs but this no longer matters to him.

Not only does Douglass demonstrate that he shirks his desires to find freedom but he also finds a form of freedom in the fight with Covey that seems to contradict the other conceptions of freedom that he holds throughout his life. This disjunction between Douglass' later understandings of freedom and between the type of freedom he takes himself to find in resistance add to my conclusion that Douglass does - in fact - "retreat to the inner citadel".[53] While it is not within the scope of this argument to describe this difference in detail, I proceed by offering one core example of the freedom Douglass takes himself to find in the fight with Covey undermines his later ideas about freedom.

Berlin's articulation of the agent who "retreats to the inner citadel" necessitates that the agent isolates herself from both their material conditions and from those around

[51] page 152, *Bondage*
[52] page 10, Two Concepts of Liberty
[53] page 10, Two Concepts of Liberty

them.[54] When Douglass finds freedom by retreating in this manner, he has to isolate himself from his fellow men. By focusing on his internal self not only does Douglass isolate himself from the harm Covey caused him and from the potential harm he could experience as a result of resistance but, he isolates himself from others around him. While in the narrative Douglass does mention that some slaves showed solidarity by refusing to help Covey fight him, the emphasis on Douglass' retelling of this particular act of resistance does not emphasize this.[55] Rather, the freedom Douglass takes himself to find as a result of this act is individual.

In later writing and speeches, Douglass takes a decisively different approach to discussing freedom. Rather than emphasize the individual sense of self-respect he achieved by engaging in resistance, Douglass clearly emphasizes the "brotherhood" of all people.[56] In fact, Douglass draws a direct connection between the freedom of the individual and the freedom of all people. The sense of freedom he later develops is clearly focused on the well-being of those around Douglass where the freedom he finds with Covey notably lacks this focus.

Douglass clearly qualifies as an agent who attempts to find freedom by "retreating to the inner citadel" under Berlin's account.[57] When recounting what he gained from resisting in his narrative, Douglass reports to find freedom that is not related to his desires. The form of freedom he finds is such that he is "no longer afraid to die" and no longer concerned with the external consequences of his actions.[58] In addition to reporting to find a form of freedom that was not connected from his desires, he also demonstrates that he gave up particular desires prior to engaging in resistance. My claim is further supported when Douglass' later conception of freedom as one that is neccessarily communal is considered. Not only is Douglass isolated from the consequences of his act of resistance against Covey but he is also isolated from those in his community.

---

[54] page 10, Two Concepts of Liberty
[55]page 154, *Bondage*
[56] page 300, *Bondage*
[57] page 10, Two Concepts of Liberty
[58] page 155, *Bondage*

III. Jacobs

a. Jacobs Becoming Free in Resistance

With Douglass' act of resistance and weakness of his account of freedom established, I will now turn to the second case of resistance considered in this paper. The following sections focus on Harriet Jacobs' - a former slave and an American abolitionist thinker - account of resistance against her owner, Flint.[59] I aim to demonstrate that similar to Douglass, Jacobs was able to find a form of freedom in the act of resistance itself.

The type of resistance engaged in by Jacobs is notably similar to the type of resistance that many enslaved women committed to avoid predatory sexual exploitation by their slaveholders.[60] Like many enslaved women, Jacobs was subject to a pervasive threat of sexual assault by her slaveholder, Flint. This threat of sexual exploitation and violence was so common among enslaved women that Jacobs refers to it as "inevitable".[61] Both the inevitability of sexual violence for enslaved women and the fact that Jacobs' strategy of resistance was common among enslaved women makes important to understand the type of freedom that she was able to find in resisting.

Jacobs characterizes the environment she was raised in as one that was marked with "licentiousness" on the part of the men around her and "fear" of gender-based violence.[62] While exposed to this from a young age, Jacobs' direct exposure to the threat of sexual violence began when she was fifteen years old.[63] Flint began to constantly threaten and sexually harass Jacobs. In *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*, Jacobs explains that Flint would "whisper foul words in [her] ear" and consistently exposed her to sexually inappropriate discussions.[64] Not only is this seen as overtly threatening to Jacobs but this is also seen by her as a corruption of the morals that she held with strong conviction. She states that, "He [Flint] tried his utmost to corrupt the pure principles my

---

[59] Flint is a pseudonym Jacobs uses for James Norcom

[60] Shatema, Threadcraft. *Intimate Justice: The Black Female Body and the Body Politic.* (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2016).

[61] page 48, Harriet Jacobs. *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*, ed. Frances Smith Foster and Richard Yarborough in Second Norton Critical Edition. (New York, NY: W.W. Norton and Company, 2021)

[62] page 47, *Incidents*

[63] page 27, *Incidents*

[64] page 27, *Incidents*

grandmother had instilled. He populated my young mind with unclean images such as only a vile monster could think of."[65]

Clearly disgusted by this consistent harassment, Jacobs attempts to "turn from him" and ignore his increasingly aggressive advances. However, this is ultimately not successful. When Jacobs tried to ignore or avoid Flint, he continued to make it clear that she was his property. She states that:

> "He [Flint] told me I was his property; that I must be subject to his will in all things. My soul revolted against the mean tyranny. But where could I turn for protection?…there is no shadow of law to protect [me] from insult, from violence, or even from death; all these are inflicted by fiends who bear the shape of men. The mistress, who ought to protect the helpless victim [Jacobs] has not other feeling towards her but those of jealousy and rage. The degradation, the wrongs, the vices, that grow out of slavery are more than I can describe."[66]

Jacobs found herself in a situation that left her with no clear avenues to avoid Flint's advances. Flint consistently reminded her that she was subject to his whims and desires even though she clearly does not want to engage with him. Additionally, Jacobs recognized that she had no allies that could potentially aid her in avoiding Flint's advances. Neither the law nor other women were willing to offer her and - as recognized by Jacobs - other enslaved women subject to similar forms of sexual exploitation any sort of aid.[67]

As Flint's advances continue, Jacobs ultimately decides to engage in resistance against Flint which would - if successful - grant her freedom from both Flint's threats of sexual violence and also from slavery. When faced with the escalating violence from Flint, Jacobs resolves that, "[she] would do any thing, every thing, for the sake of defeating him [Flint]."[68] To resist Flint, Jacobs begins engaging in a sexual relationship with Sands - an unmarried white man who Jacobs describes as an "educated and eloquent gentleman".[69] Jacobs calculates that Sands would buy her.[70] She states that,"He was a

---

[65] page 27, *Incidents*
[66] page 28, *Incidents*
[67] page 28, *Incidents*
[68] page 49, *Incidents*
[69] page 50, *Incidents*
[70] Sands is a pseudonym Jacobs uses for Samuel Sawyer

man of more generosity and feeling than my master, and I thought my freedom could be easily obtained from him."[71]

However, this plan does is not ultimately successful. Jacobs becomes pregnant with Sands' child and in a rage, Flint vows that he will never sell her.[72] While Jacobs' plan does not come to fruition, she still expresses that she found a form of meaningful freedom through her act of resistance. When reflecting on engaging in a relationship with Sands, Jacobs explain that:

> "It seems less degrading to give one's self, than to submit to compulsion. There is *something akin to freedom* in having a lover who has no control over you, expect that which he gains by kindness and attachment."[73]

Although Jacobs' act of resistance does not result in freedom for her as hoped, she - nonetheless - finds a form of freedom in engaging in resistance itself. By choosing to engage in a relationship with Sands, Jacobs is able to exercise control over her environment even if the choice she makes is not ideal. Jacobs finds "something akin to freedom" in making this decision and choosing to engage in resistance even though her initial plan for her act of resistance is not successful.[74]

Like the case of Douglass, a similar puzzle arises with Jacobs' resistance. If she remains still, very clearly, dominated by Flint, how could Jacobs report finding "something akin to freedom"?[75] Finding freedom as a result of non-domination would require Jacobs to achieve any sort of non-domination from Flint. However, Jacobs was unable to escape Flint's advances through her act of resistance. From this, we know that Jacobs - like Douglass - did not consider the freedom she found to be determined by non-domination or lack of interference. Rather, she was able to find "something akin to freedom" in resisting itself.[76]

b. Jacobs' Freedom in Control of Material Circumstances

Similarly to Douglass, we established that Jacobs considers herself to have

---

[71] page 50, *Incidents*
[72] page 54, *Incidents*
[73] page 50, *Incidents,* emphases mine
[74] page 50, *Incidents*
[75] page 50, *Incidents*
[76] page 50, *Incidents*

achieved “something akin to freedom” by performing her act of resistance against Flint although she is still dominated by him. This apparent contradiction between achieving freedom and still being dominated is even more apparent in Jacobs’ case because unlike Douglass, her act of resistance does not prevent her from further exposure to the type of harm she hoped to avoid. If anything, in the immediate aftermath of her pregnancy, Jacobs is seemingly exposed to more coercion and angry, abusive outbursts from Flint than she was before. Still, upon reflection in *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*, Jacobs does not express regret over her actions. Rather, she still regards her act of resistance - engaging in a relationship with Mr. Sands - as something that provided her with a form of freedom. This provides us with the standing question of: What does Jacobs mean when she says that she finds “something akin to freedom” in her act of resistance?

To begin to answer this question, we can first evaluate what Jacobs is looking at when she engages in resistance in order to see the sense in which Jacobs is free. Clearly, as an enslaved woman Jacobs was decidedly not free but her immediate impetus to resist was not a result of her more general circumstance as a slave. Rather, textual evidence points to the fact that the primary harm Jacobs was responding to when she engaged in resistance against Flint was her lack of control over her sexual and reproductive capacities. Prior to engaging in resistance against Flint, Jacobs references the day-to-day threat sexual violence that she and all enslaved women around her experienced. Her threatening and coercive experiences with Flint that she includes in her narrative provide evidence to support the claim that Jacobs’ absence of bodily autonomy and sexual agency motivated her act of resistance. In the following paragraphs, I provide more evidence for this claim.

Jacobs’ sexual and reproductive control was taken away from her in two distinct ways. The first way this occurred was through structural violence. Jacobs, from a young age, was subject to the pervasive threat of sexual violence. While not personally experiencing instances of overt sexual violence, Jacobs was nonetheless impacted by exposure to this. In *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl,* Jacobs describes the environment

that she and other enslaved women were raised in from childhood in the following passage.

> "The slave girl is reared in an atmosphere of licentiousness and fear. The lash and the foul talk of her master and his sons are her teachers. When she is fourteen or fifteen, her owner, or his sons, or the overseer, or perhaps all of them, begin to bribe her with presents. If these fail to accomplish their purpose, she is whipped or starved into submission to their will."[77]

Raised in this environment, Jacobs understood that experiencing sexual violence by men was an inevitable fact of life. If one believes that experiencing sexual violence is inevitable due to their identity then, they cannot feel in control of their sexual and reproductive choices even if they are able to avoid sexual violence in the short-term. This means that the environment that Jacobs was in necessarily limited her sexual and reproductive choices because she was an enslaved woman.

Although the primary target of this argument is sexual violence experienced by Jacobs, it is still important to consider the physical harm done to her by Flint. Here, we can consider the second type of violence Jacobs experienced: personally targeted violence. She describes the history of physical assaults she experienced at the hands of Flint stating that she lived in fear and "dreaded the consequences of a violent outbreak" by Flint. [78] This violent history coupled with the pervasive threat of sexual violence that Jacobs was exposed to created an environment where she had no control over her sexual or reproductive capacities.

In addition to the overt physical violence that Jacobs experienced by Flint, she is also subject to Flint limiting her capacity to freely engage in relationships. In the text, Jacobs describes how Flint interfered with her romantic interests. While enslaved by Flint, Jacobs meets a young man who had been free since birth and worked as a carpenter in the town close to Flint's plantation.[79] After he proposes to her, Jacobs realizes that

---

[77] 47, *Incidents*
[78] page 28, *Incidents*
[79] page 35, *Incidents*

although she loves this man and desires to marry him, Flint will not let her marry him. She describes this situation in the following passage.

> "But when I reflected that I was a slave, and that the laws gave me no sanction to the marriage of such, my heart sank within me. My lover wanted to buy me; but I knew that Dr. Flint was too willful and arbitrary a man to consent to that arrangement."[80]

Although she wants to engage in a committed relationship with this man, a partner of her choosing, Flint ultimately has to "consent" to it.

The textual evidence found in Jacobs' narrative supports the conclusion that her primary impetus for resisting Flint was the lack of control that she had over her personal sexual and reproductive capacities. Threadcraft supports this general claim through her interpretation in *Intimate Justice*.[81]Threadcraft observes that loss of control over one's sexual and reproductive capacities was a pervasive form of violence that enslaved women faced. The fact that Jacobs describes her resistance as confronting this specific form of violence reflects Threadcraft's claim.

In *Intimate Justice,* Threadcraft also introduces the concept of "reciprocal action".[82] This is a targeted action that provides freedom - in some form - to an oppressed agent by responding to the harm they are experiencing in a similar, equivalent manner. While Threadcraft was focused more on immediate material outcomes that lessened domination, this can be extended to freedom that is found in resistance itself. Under Threadcraft's understanding of this concept, an act of resistance is successful only if it proportionately responds to the primary harm a person experiences.

Jacobs was able to find freedom in resisting because she was able to respond to the oppression she was facing with an equivalent, reciprocal action. The point of many of Flint's threats was to minimize the control that Jacobs had over her own body and to

---

[80] page 35, *Incidents*

[81] Shatema, Threadcraft. *Intimate Justice: The Black Female Body and the Body Politic.* (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2016).

[82] page 49, *Intimate Justice*

reinforce the fact that he was the one who had total control over her. As established, Jacobs considers herself to find "something akin to freedom" in resisting Flint by engaging in a relationship with Sands. Using the concept of "reciprocal action" we can determine that she was motivated by the lack of control over her sexual and reproductive decisions. This means that in order for her act of resistance to be successful at gaining freedom, it must have provided her with control over these parts of her life.

We can gather that Jacobs describes herself as successful when recalling her act of resistance. In choosing a sexual partner, Jacobs is able to find freedom by responding to the oppressive lack of control Flint's threats, violence, and the environment she faced as an enslaved women provided her with. Prior to engaging in a relationship with Sands, Jacobs did not have any evidence that she was capable of exercising active control in this manner. Rather, in the past, Flint had decisively shown her through both physical violence and through intervening in her relationships that he was the only one who had control over her sexual and reproductive choices.

In resistance, Jacobs is able to gain freedom because she is able to gain liberation from the expectation that she was unable to make active choices regarding these parts of her life. Her act of resistance provides her with a meaningful level of freedom because not only does Jacobs make her own choices but her choices and boundaries are respected by another person. Jacobs' power does not exist in isolation. This is reflected when Jacobs describes that "her lover" - Sands - does not have control over her.[83] Rather, she has agency in the relationship which is demonstrated by her description of how Sands must treat her with "kindness and attachment" in order for the relationship to continue.[84]

In addition to finding freedom through exercising her own choice, Jacobs is additionally able to find freedom in resistance by demonstrating to Flint that he - in actuality - does not have total control over her. One of the consequences of Jacobs' relationship with Sands was pregnancy. While this pregnancy was not necessarily planned, Jacobs purposely does not inform Flint about her pregnancy until it is past the

[83] page 50, *Incidents*
[84] page 50, *Incidents*

time when he would be able to force her to have an abortion.[85] In the following passage from *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl,* Jacobs describes Flint's reaction to her pregnancy.

> "He intimated that if I had accepted his proposals that he, as a physician, could have saved me from exposure. He even condescended to pity me. Could he have offered wormwood more bitter? He, whose persecutions had been the cause of my sin!"[86]

This passage may initially provide a reader of Jacobs with the false impression that Flint provided her with the chance to "accept his proposals.[87] However, this is not accurate as rather than offering her a decision, Flint consistently threatened Jacobs with sexual assault. In this passage, Flint is once again aiming to exert control over Jacobs' sexual and reproductive choices by explaining that he would have "offered" her wormwood - an abortifacient - if he had known about her pregnancy. However, in this case it is Jacobs that has the power over her reproductive capacities because she had successfully calculated when she told Flint about her pregnancy and waited until he could no longer force her to have an abortion.

The pregnancy is a direct result of Jacobs' act of resistance and by protecting her pregnancy from Flint, Jacobs is able to exercise a choice that directly counters Flint's belief that he has control over her sexual and reproductive capacities. Here, Jacobs finds freedom because her active choice not only impacts her but also impacts the consequences that others are able to force on her. By deciding to hide her pregnancy, Jacobs proves that her act of engaging in a relationship granted her personal control over both her sexual and reproductive capacities when the relationship with Sands occurred but also resulted in being able to maintain active choice in her limited circumstances. We can conclude that when Jacobs said that she found "something akin to freedom" she meant that she was able to exercise personal choice and gain - even limited - control over her circumstances.[88]

---

[85] paraphrase, page 52-3, *Incidents*
[86] page 53, *Incidents*
[87] page 53, *Incidents*
[88] page 50, *Incidents*

c. Jacobs and Practical Agency

Prior to examining the efficacy of the freedom found by Jacobs, it is worthwhile to briefly contrast this with the form of freedom found by Douglass. At this point, I have established that Douglass and Jacobs both take themselves to achieve a form of freedom in resistance even though they are still dominated in the respective circumstances. However, there is an important distinction between the two forms of freedom they found. Douglass became free because he regained self-respect through his fight with Covey. Jacobs found "something akin to freedom" because she was able to exercise personal choice and gain - even limited - control over her circumstances. Unlike Douglass, this form of freedom Jacobs found was necessarily oriented externally and required Jacobs to exercise choice and control over her situation. This distinction becomes important when we consider the normative question of whether Douglass or Jacobs offers a preferable account of freedom.

In order to better judge the efficacy of Jacobs' account, I will focus on the criticism raised by Berlin about agents who "retreat into the inner citadel."[89] When I discussed the shortcomings of Douglass' account I demonstrated that Douglass failed to offer a compelling account of freedom because he was disconnected from his desires in resistance. I evaluate Jacobs' account of freedom in light of this same factor: desires. In this section, I argue that because Jacobs' act of resistance was oriented towards exerting control over her external circumstances she was connected to her desires in resistance. Before focusing on Jacobs' narrative, I will first address the question of what being connected to desires during resistance looks like by sketching an account of practical agency. Ultimately, I aim to argue that on one way of thinking about practical agency, Jacobs is exercising practical agency.

The suggestion of practical agency that I aim to develop can be thought of as a step-wise process rather than a straightforward definition. This is particularly important because the process of developing practical agency is neccessarily intentional. If an agent

[89] page 11, Berlin, Two Concepts of Liberty

passively completes the steps required then by definition they are not developing or exercising the type of agency I aim to establish.

The first step required for an agent to gain practical agency on my account is that they must identify their desire or related set of desires. When an agent is being deprived of something that they would like to do or something they would like to have, it makes sense that they would desire the particular "thing" they are unable to have. There is one important constraint placed on this step on my account. In particular, the desire or set of desires must be specific enough to be acted on. While I aim to establish a general account of practical agency, I will note that in the context of my current argument I am discussing this as part of resistance. So, an oppressed agent must be able to identify a desire or set of related desires that are specific enough to be the impetus for a targeted act of resistance.

This is not to say that an agent cannot wish for more vague things in general. For example, it makes sense that someone who is a slave would wish for a general sense of control. However, upon reflection it would be difficult to act on a more general desire. Rather, action - in this case resistance - requires a more specific motivating desire. This ability to reflect and determine either the most important or most pressing set of desires is important to my account of personal agency because it allows the agent to begin the process of working towards their identified desire.

The second step requires an agent to evaluate their material conditions in light of their identified desire. It is intuitive that prior to acting in a way that is aimed at fulfilling a desire, an agent must have an accurate grasp of the circumstances they are presently in. However, it is very important that an agent evaluates their circumstances after identifying their targeted desire. Without this, it would not be possible for an agent to fully evaluate how their environment interacts with their desire and how their particular circumstances create barriers between them and their desire.

Once an agent has evaluated their material circumstances in light of their desires, then they must work towards fulfilling their particular set of desires. This can look different for each agent depending on the situation they are in. However, the target of my argument is freedom found in resistance. So, in the context of this argument I will focus

on agents who work towards fulfilling their set of desires by engaging in acts of resistance. To demonstrate my account of practical agency, I will later on in this section discuss how Jacobs' act of resistance maps onto my framework.

The last step in my process of gaining practical agency is as follows. This step stipulates that in order to cultivate practical agency, an agent must consistently evaluate their actions aimed toward fulfilling their desire in light of both their desires and their changing material circumstances. Importantly, they are responsive to change in their material circumstances but are still guided by their original set of desires. This last step points out two important benefits my account of practical agency offers. First, it establishes that practical agency is not limited to a particular point in time nor is it limited to one act. Rather, practical agency is an important quality that a person can work to develop over time. Second, it highlights the importance that both intentionality and reasoning capacities have in my account of practical agency. An agent who does not intentionally engage in actions oriented towards fulfilling their desires will not be able to consistently reevaluate these actions. Additionally, this type of process requires an agent to exercise reasoning capacities. This is not to say that my account requires an agent to make perfect decisions constantly but rather it requires them to intentionally work towards their desires to the best of their ability even if their circumstances change.

This sketch of practical agency offers a mechanism of resistance that is connected to desire. Jacobs' account of resistance clearly fulfills the first step in my account of developing practical agency. This step stipulates that an agent must identify a specific desire or set of related desires. The first place this is apparent is with Jacob's analysis of what particular aspects of her life are limited by Flint. Jacobs explains that she is in a situation where she has no real control over her sexual choices or over the relationships she pursues. She laments that, "If slavery had been abolished I could have married the man of my choice."[90] She recognizes this lack of control because of her situation and still responds by resolving to resist. This particular desire, the desire to have control of her

[90] page 49, Incidents

sexual and reproductive choices, fulfills the criteria that I proposed for a desire to qualify as part of my account of practical agency.

Since she is enslaved, it seems intuitive that Jacobs would naturally feel a lack of control over nearly every part of her life. However, it is clear that she has identified the lack of control she has over her sexual and reproductive capacities as an area that she feels a significant, unique lack of control over. This is evident from the outset of her narrative. Jacobs explains that experiencing sexual violence as an enslaved women is "inevitable".[91] This feeling of sexual violence being "inevitable" to Jacobs demonstrates that Jacobs has the sense that no matter what she does as an enslaved woman she will experience some type of autonomy limiting violence. Jacobs' emphasis on her lack of control over her sexual and reproductive choices as well as her identification of a barrier that prevents her from having this makes this an appropriate candidate for her desire. Even if Jacobs desired a more general sense of control, the lack of control she had over her sexual and reproductive capacities was clearly one of the most prevalent types of harm she experienced.

After identifying their specific desire, an agent must then evaluate her material circumstances to also identify how they specifically limit their ability to have the thing they want. In reality, the first two steps of acquiring practical agency likely occur - at least in part - in conjunction. It would be unrealistic to think that Jacobs could identify her desire to have control over her sexual and reproductive capacities without the understanding that she did not have control over this aspect of her life in her particular set of circumstances. Intuitively, her previous experiences in her environment shaped her desire. However, this does not mean that Jacobs did not evaluate her material circumstances in light of her identified desire of sexual and reproductive autonomy.

After identifying her desire as sexual and reproductive autonomy, Jacobs notes the ways in which her current material circumstances limit her ability to presently fulfill her desire. Upon reflecting on her circumstances, Jacobs is able to recognize Flint as the primary barrier standing between her and the type of control she desires. A reader may

[91] page 47, Incidents

object that Jacobs' identification of Flint as the primary barrier between her and her desire is obvious without reflection on her particular set of circumstances. After all, Flint owns Jacobs so it seems unrealistic to believe that any other part of her environment could be the barrier preventing her from having sexual and reproductive autonomy.

However when you consider the totality of Jacobs' narrative, it is clear that she had to reflect on her present situation to appropriately identify this. Throughout her narrative, Jacobs' notes a wide variety of aspects of her environment that limit her ability to have control over her sexual and reproductive autonomy. The first sense of a barrier between Jacobs and her desire is more general. Early in her narrative she explains that she was in an environment of "all-pervading corruption".[92]

With this in mind, it is clear that Jacobs' begins her discussion of her lack of sexual and reproductive autonomy with a more general barrier in the way of her desire. Here, the narrative does not target Flint and Flint is not readily identified as a barrier at this point in time. Rather, Jacobs' discussion demonstrates that the fact that she was an enslaved woman is the barrier between her and her desire. She views the experience of sexual exploitation as inevitable but it is not neccessarily inevitable that she will experience it by Flint.

Additionally, during the period of time where Jacobs reflects on her desire to have sexual and reproductive autonomy, Jacobs faces a new threat from Flint. Namely, he has expressed a plan that would further limit Jacobs' sexual and reproductive autonomy. Jacobs describes this in the following passage stating that:

> "In the blandest tones, he told me that he was going to build a small house for me, in a secluded place, four miles away from the town. I shuddered; but I was constrained to listen, while he talked of his intention to give me a home of my own and make a lady of me. Hitherto, I had escaped my dreaded fate, by being in the midst of people."[93]

Once Flint is able to isolate her, she will no longer be able to act in accordance with her own will. So, by identifying Flint as the primary barrier between her and sexual and

---

[92] page 47, *Incidents*

[93] page 48, *Incidents*

reproductive autonomy Jacobs is able to demonstrate that she has correctly assessed both her past and future circumstances if she does not act.

Once identifying Flint as the barrier between her and the desires she has targeted, Jacobs clearly works toward pursuing her desires. When describing her choice to engage in resistance Jacobs says the following: "I knew what I did, and I did it with *deliberate* calculation."[94] Rather than remain subject to the lack of control afforded to her by her situation, Jacobs is able to make a clear and "deliberate" choice to resist by entering into a relationship with Sands in the first place.[95]

While Jacobs is not responding to one specific instance of violence or one specific type of oppression, she is able to respond to the general lack of control over her sexual and reproductive choice afforded to her in her environment by Flint. By explicitly stating that the decision to resist is "deliberate", Jacobs first responds to her circumstances by exerting her power and control.[96] Rather than relegate her fate to the whims of Dr. Flint and to the pattern of her environment, Jacobs is able to respond appropriately by behaving in a way that requires her to make purposeful decisions.

Importantly, Jacobs' act of resistance works towards her desires in a way that helps to illuminate how she becomes free in the act of resistance itself. Immediately, by choosing to enter into a relationship in such a deliberate manner, Jacobs is able to embody her desire to have control over her sexual and reproductive capacities. Prior to engaging in a relationship with Sands, Jacobs did not have any evidence that she was capable of exercising active control in this manner. In particular, Jacobs did not exercise deliberate choice and autonomy within a relationship with someone who also respected her personhood. She describes the dynamic between her and Sands as the following. She characterizes Sands as "a lover who has no control over [her], except which he gains by kindness and attachment."[97]

Rather, in the past, Flint had decisively shown her through both physical violence

---

[94] page 49, *Incidents* [emphases mine]

[95] page 49, *Incidents*

[96] page 49, *Incidents*

[97] page 50, *Incidents*

and through intervening in her relationships that he was the only one who had control over her sexual and reproductive choices. In resistance, Jacobs is able to gain freedom because she is able to gain liberation from the expectation that she was unable to make active choices regarding these parts of her life. So, she achieves "something akin to freedom" in resistance because she is able to circumvent the barrier Flint placed on her intimate relationships when she engages in a relationship with Sands.

It should be noted that this freedom exists regardless of the direct outcome the act of resistance has. Jacobs fully expected that Sands would be able to purchase her from Flint. Upon Flint's revelation that he would not sell her Jacobs states the following:

> "Hope died away in my heart as he [Flint] closed the door after him. I had calculated that in his rage he would sell me to a slave-trader; and I knew the father of my child [Sands] was on watch to buy me."[98]

Jacobs recognizes that she has "calculated" incorrectly and that Sands will not be able to purchase her and free her from Flint. However, my account of practical agency allows the freedom that Jacobs' gained within her relationship with Sands to still be recognized as valuable. Although Flint did not behave in expected fashion, this does not mean that Jacobs' resistance was futile. Rather, since Jacobs was working toward a specific set of desires by circumventing the barrier between her and said desires she is still able to become free. The agency she exercised within the relationship with Sands does not disappear due to Flint's behavior. This provides an explanation for why she is able to be both free and dominated.

Importantly, Jacobs does not stop pursuing freedom after Flint behaves unpredictably and spoils her plan. Rather than stop working toward her identified desire of sexual and reproductive autonomy altogether, Jacobs is able to fulfill the fourth step in gaining practical agency. In light of newly developed material conditions, Jacobs consistently reevaluates the action she takes to gain sexual and reproductive autonomy. Jacobs persists throughout new, changing circumstances and aims to escape Flint in order

[98] page 54, *Incidents*

to protect herself and her children. She explains that '"Give me liberty or give me death," was [at one time her] motto.'[99] Although her circumstances change throughout time, it is important to recognize that Jacobs maintained her desire to have sexual and reproductive autonomy. With the birth of her children, this sense of autonomy also naturally extends to autonomy to protect and raise her children how she wants and without the threats of Dr. Flint. In the following passage, Jacobs expresses the type of freedom she desires and that she consistently plans to gain that freedom even though she is faced with obstacles.

> "I was dreaming of freedom again more for my children's sake than my own. I planned and I planned. Obstacles hit against plans. There seemed no way of overcoming them; and yet I hoped."[100]

From this analysis, it is evident that Jacobs does gain a sense of practical agency when she engages in her act of resistance. Not only is she able to identify her desires but she is also able to consistently work towards them. This gives her account a distinct advantage over Douglass' account of freedom. As established, Douglass' account of freedom in resistance is one that is entirely divorced from his desires which is reflected in the manner he "retreats to the inner citadel". This form of freedom is ultimately unsatisfying because it means that the agent seeking freedom does not work towards altering their material circumstances in any way that would improve their conditions. Rather than work to bring the things he desires to fruition, Douglass engages in a risky act of physical resistance. While he values this because he regains his self-respect, the account is weakened because of his solely internal focus.

Jacobs' account does not suffer from this problem. While she does not fulfill all her external desires, Jacobs' narrative demonstrates an account of freedom in resistance that is oriented towards bringing the conditions of her world more closer to what she desires. For example, in resistance itself, she even gets moments of fulfilling her desire to be in a relationship where her partner respects her and where she is not threatened by Flint. Douglass' account does not give us moments like this. Rather, it leaves us with an

[99] page 86, *Incidents*
[100] page 72, *Incidents*

account that is so isolated from his external circumstances Douglass is "no longer afraid to die." Douglass' disconnection from his desires also means that he does not gain the sense of agency Jacobs does when she resists. In resistance, Jacobs is able to gain a sense of agency that provides her with the knowledge that she is able to pursue what she wants and that others in the world react to her decisions. This makes her account of freedom found in resistance preferable to Douglass' account of freedom.

IV. Conclusion

This paper began with the initial puzzle of how to explain the tension between recognizing that one is both "unfree" and free after engaging in resistance. Douglass' and Jacobs' narratives describing resistance serve as examples of this. By examining the narrative accounts of their acts of resistance, it is apparent that they both are able find forms of freedom while engaging in resistance even though they both recognize that the conditions they are in after resisting are decisively limited. From an outside perspective, it is possible that their acts of resistance may not have been recognized as actually freedom-promoting.

By evaluating both Douglass' and Jacobs' narratives of the freedom they found in resistance, more insight can be gained about the specific types of freedom they gained in resistance. Douglass found a form of freedom - became a "freeman in fact" - when he engaged in resistance against Covey because he found an internal sense of freedom. While this is certainly a form of freedom, Douglass' strategy presents a problem. Like the agent Berlin describes who "retreats to the inner citadel" , Douglass aimed to find freedom through divorcing himself from any external desires and solely focusing on what he could immediately control - his perception of himself and his self-respect.

Douglass' isolation from his desires ultimately presents a problem for his account of freedom that is made more clear by the type of freedom Jacobs found in resistance. Jacobs found freedom by aiming to exert control over her circumstances even though she recognized the type of control she could exert was limited. By finding freedom in making deliberate choices Jacobs is able to maintain her present desire to avoid sexual violence by Flint and directly pursue this desire in her act of resistance. Accounts of freedom

oriented towards recognizing and pursuing their desires - like the one offered by Jacobs - are more effective accounts of finding freedom in resistance because they allow agents to recognize the freedom found in resisting their oppressor even if the result is not optimal. This understanding establishes the intrinsic benefit of engaging in resistance while still allowing an agent to maintain their desire to free themselves from their oppressive circumstances. An agent aiming to become free like Jacobs benefits by resisting - regardless of optimal outcome - because she is able to foster a sense of practical agency.

The differences in Douglass' and Jacobs' accounts of resistance highlight how complicated and messy thinking about freedom in resistance can be. Douglass tells us what it means to be free in spite of struggle but Jacobs shows us what it means to be free in struggle. Even in analogous situations like these, there is no one path to finding freedom and no one way to think about freedom and - naturally - some may be better than others. Jacobs' narrative is powerful because she gives us insight into what finding freedom may look like when the freedom we find comes from our struggle against oppression. There is no clear cut "winner" or "loser" in Jacobs' account. Rather, she becomes free by pursuing her desires the best she can in a limited environment. The upshot of this is that there is something valuable by engaging with and being responsive to our environment even when the situation we resist persists after our acts of resistance are complete and even if our freedom requires a continued struggle.

V. Bibliography

Berlin, Isaiah. Two Concepts of Liberty: An Inaugural Lecture **Delivered Before** the University of Oxford on 31 October 1958. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1958.

Bernard Boxill. "The Fight with Covey." In A Political Companion to Frederick Douglass, 61– 83. Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 2018.

Frederick Douglass. *My Bondage and My Freedom,* ed. Nick Bromell and R. Blakeslee Gilpin in Norton Critical Edition. (New York, NY: W.W. Norton and Company, 2021)

Harriet Jacobs. *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*, ed. Frances Smith Foster and Richard Yarborough in Second Norton Critical Edition. (New York, NY: W.W. Norton and Company, 2021)

Shatema, Threadcraft. *Intimate Justice: The Black Female Body and the Body Politic.* (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2016).