

Frederick Douglass describes in the *Narrative of Life* his struggle to form meaningful relationships and a sense of kinship under the institution of slavery that sought to prevent any such bonds between the enslaved black people. In order to alienate family members from each other to dehumanize them more effectively (as well as relieving themselves of any consequences of sexually using their female slaves and having their biological children serving as slaves), the masters often separated children from their parents. Frederick Douglass was also separated in this way, and as a result he was unable to experience a true bond with his mother or siblings.

However, there were a few of his family members left that he found ways of relating to in some way. There was the figure of a grandmother, that was tasked with looking after him in his early childhood, and there was the aunt, aunt Hester, to whom he was in a sense bound through witnessing her exceptional suffering by the hand of the master, who sexually and physically abused her and in Douglass's description seems to take a perverse pleasure in whipping her. Feelings of compassion and sympathy, strengthened by the experience of witnessing such atrocities done upon others contributes greatly to Douglass's later expressed sense of being kin to all of black people, referring to them as brethren and sisters – this bond to a large degree to forged by shared suffering and injustice.

Another figure in Frederick Douglass's life that, at least for a moment, seems to take on the motherly role in his life, is his mistress in Baltimore. She is at first portrayed as a nurturing presence, unknowingly giving Douglass the first of tools that would later help him to achieve his freedom, the knowledge of an alphabet. However we soon learn that she was after a time so hardened by slave-holding, that she became equally or more cruel than her husband.

A sense of familiar bond, or at least some sort of fellowship is then depicted between Douglass and several poor white boys, with whom he exchanged food for writing lessons. He writes that upon his leave from Baltimore he regrets leaving them behind: "It was to those little Baltimore boys that I felt the strongest attachment. I had received many good lessons from them, and was still receiving them, and the thought of leaving them was painful indeed"(34)

Importantly, as he gets older Douglass actively tries to build community of his fellow slaves and support them in bettering their condition, through instituting a Sunday school and teaching them to read. He writes very affectionately about the meetings and the sort of deep bond that developed through them between the attendees through learning together, noting that: "The work of instructing my dear fellow-slaves was the sweetest engagement with which I was ever blessed. We loved each other, and to leave them at the close of the Sabbath was a severe cross indeed" (48). The sense of kinship and connection was so strong that Douglass puts the affection he felt towards them above all emotional attachments he felt ever since, saying that: "We were linked and interlinked with each other (...) I never loved any or confided in any people more than my fellow slaves, and especially those with whom I lived at Mr. Freeland's. I believe we would have died for each other" (49). Here we can note a crucial aspect that ultimately defines Douglass's success at finding an alternative family – the kinship is not defined only through shared suffering but also through shared joy.

It is within this group, because of the relationship that he has with these people, that Douglass also later finds companions willing to attempt an escape with him. The company that forms around Douglass and tries for an escape is at that time unfortunately unsuccessful. However it is important to note just how much bravery and courage went into even attempting an escape. The chance for it succeeding was small and the consequences dreadful to say the least. This exceptional bravery and mutual support in this endeavor further strengthens the connection that Douglass feels towards his fellows and he is very pained by the separation of their little group when their plan is discovered.

Another group of people that Douglass speaks of affectionately as, in a sense parent figures of the runaways, are abolitionist providing him with safe houses and supplies on his escape journey, and ultimately the Johnsons that end up "adopting" him, taking him under their wing and even naming him in a way (Douglass) and thus being reminiscent of godparents. And then there are of course freed black people, protecting each other against kidnapers and supporting each other

through abolitionist meetings, that he finds he can lead with his oratory abilities. These people then might be seen as becoming his children in a way, as he is later seen as one of the father figures and heroes of the abolitionist movement.

Finally, there is a brief mention of Douglass finding a wife and establishing family of his own outside of the shackles of slavery and therefore with a hope of at least partially righting the wrongs of his childhood.

Source:

Douglass, F. (2005). *Narrative of the life of Frederick Douglass*.