

## Chapter 4

# “We Hold These Truths to Be Self-Evident”

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## *The Rhetoric of Frederick Douglass's Journalism*

ON 22 AUGUST 1844, the young Frederick Douglass wrote to J. Miller McKim: “Though quite unaccustomed to write anything for the public eye, and in many instances quite unwilling to do so, in the present case I cannot content myself to take leave of you . . . without dropping you a very hasty, and of course very imperfect sketch of the Anti-slavery meetings.”<sup>1</sup>

Little did Douglass then suspect that over the next fifty years he would do little else but “write for the public eye” on antislavery and other related topics. Indeed, under the aegis of such white abolitionists as William Lloyd Garrison, Douglass had started what would become a long and illustrious career in journalism in the early 1840s, writing for *The Liberator* as well as other antislavery newspapers. Chafing under constraints imposed by the white abolitionist leadership, however, Douglass gradually broke away to create his own journalistic organs: first *The North Star*, followed by *Frederick Douglass' Paper* and still later by *Douglass' Monthly*. After the Civil War, Douglass maintained his prolific journalistic output, writing on all the major issues confronting blacks in postbellum America for *The New National Era*, as well as such mainstream journals as *The North American Review*, *The Atlantic Monthly*, and *Harper's Weekly*.

How did a piece of property transform himself into a speaking subject?

How did a young man who had spent the first twenty-odd years of his life in slavery become the most articulate spokesman for his race and the foremost black journalist of the nineteenth century? In his autobiographical *Narrative*, Douglass tells his readers that "you have seen how a man was made a slave; you shall see how a slave was made a man" and proceeds to locate this transformative moment in an act of physical resistance, his battle with the slave breaker, Covey.<sup>2</sup> And yet, the events of Douglass's life that frame this moment make it clear that for Douglass, manhood and freedom could not be purely physical states of being, just as resistance could never simply be of a physical nature. Indeed, Douglass's language specifies that his emergence into manhood was not a new event in his life, but rather a revival of feelings formerly felt, of thoughts formerly held: "This battle with Mr. Covey was the turning-point in my career as a slave. It rekindled the few expiring embers of freedom, and revived within me a sense of my manhood. It recalled the departed self-confidence, and inspired me again with a determination to be free" (74).

Douglass locates these earlier intimations of freedom and manhood in his acquisition of reading skills and in the act of reading itself, in particular in his reading of a volume titled *The Columbian Orator*. Compiled by Caleb Bingham and first published in 1797, *The Columbian Orator* contained a variety of pieces designed to instruct "in the ornamental and useful art of eloquence";<sup>3</sup> and, according to Douglass, it was these pieces that first "gave tongue" to thoughts that Douglass himself did not yet have the language to articulate (42). From them, Douglass was for the first time exposed to contemporary notions of oratory—both to the Enlightenment discourse of freedom and independence, and to the oratorical situation itself established between speaker and audience—which would greatly influence his antebellum journalism. Indeed, from these pieces Douglass first became familiar with the rhetoric of John Locke and the Founding Fathers, which invokes the inalienable rights of man to freedom and happiness; appeals to the natural principles of liberty, equality, and justice; and inveighs against all forms of tyranny and oppression. In the speeches the oratorical voices of national leaders—Roman, English, and American—ring out with great authority. These men were able to assert themselves self-confidently as speaking subjects because they spoke both out of personal experience and

on behalf of an entity larger than the individual "I," be it an entire nation, an oppressed group within the nation, or a broad principle such as freedom.

Most important, perhaps, the pieces in *The Columbian Orator* underscored for Douglass the importance of the orator's relationship to his audience. In his introductory remarks, Bingham offers his readers some "particular rules for the voice and gesture" (24). But he focuses especially on the movement of the eyes as the "most active and significant" part of the body because, according to Cicero, "'all the passions of the soul are expressed in the eyes, by so many different actions'" (22). More than any part of the body, the orator's eyes express the passion of his convictions. How to direct one's eyes upon one's audience in order to catch its eyes and compel its attention becomes, then, a crucial question for the orator. For Douglass this question would in later years become that of translating this visual strategy into a verbal one, of figuring out how to direct the writing eye of the journalist most effectively to the reading eye of public newspaper readers.

The most prominent oratorical devices used to attract the public eye in *The Columbian Orator* are techniques of the dialogic that, as Bakhtin has pointed out, most often function as a subversive strategy designed to undermine the monologic official discourse of the dominant class.<sup>4</sup> In many of the reproduced pieces, the orator appeals directly to his audience by asking rhetorical questions that he then proceeds to answer himself. In addition, however, many pieces are actual dialogues that stage a confrontation between two antagonists who hold opposing points of view and must use their rhetorical skill to persuade the other of the rightness of his position. The "Dialogue between a Master and Slave," singled out by Douglass in his *Narrative*, exemplifies many rhetorical strategies that he was to make good use of in later years. In it, master and slave confront one another directly, face to face, making eye contact. The master, who prides himself on being kind and humane, berates the slave for having attempted to run away for a second time. The slave construes the mere fact of his master's talking to him as an acknowledgment that he is a man and, taking full advantage of this admission, constitutes himself as a speaking subject in order to press home his points. Speaking from his own experience as a man, he argues that liberty and the full exercise of his free will are the values

most precious to him. Constituting himself as spokesman for all other slaves, he assures his master that they will not hesitate to resort to violence in order to obtain these same rights. He decries the injustice of slavery and points out that no man has the right to dispose of another man. When the master attempts to argue that it is the order of Providence that one man be the slave of another, the slave skillfully points out that the argument in favor of providential design can be made for just about any situation, to the point where Providence simply becomes another form of human agency: "Providence . . . gave my enemies a power over my liberty. But it has also given me legs to escape with; and what should prevent me from using them?" (241). The entire dialogue thus constitutes a bold assertion of the power of human agency through both physical and verbal resistance.

Douglass's antebellum journalism owes much to his reading of *The Columbian Orator*. For, as a result of this reading, Douglass was able to create what Foucault has called a "counterdiscourse," by means of which an oppressed minority begins "to speak on its own behalf," demanding "that its legitimacy or 'naturalness' be acknowledged."<sup>5</sup> As Foucault has pointed out, the oppressed group most often asserts itself, not by creating a new discourse, but by "using the same categories [of the dominant discourse] by which it was . . . disqualified" and simply reversing these categories or the values that had been assigned to them. In addition, as we have seen, the dialogic can function as an important element of a counterdiscourse as it creates a variety of other voices—parodic, ironic, and so on—designed to subvert the official monologic discourse of the dominant class. In his early writings, Douglass relies heavily on such techniques of reversal and of the dialogic to fashion a powerful counterdiscourse for black Americans. He does so by forcing his opponents to enter into dialogue with him, by wresting the principles of the Declaration of Independence out of the exclusive possession of the dominant class and applying them to oppressed African-Americans, and finally by repeatedly and subversively reversing the categories that this class had so carefully assigned both to itself and to those it held in bondage. With emancipation and the acquisition of citizenship, however, Douglass would be forced to rethink the effectiveness of such rhetorical strategies and to recast them in new ways.

From his earliest days in the abolitionist movement, Douglass rec-

ognized the particular difficulty of constituting himself as a speaking and writing subject because a major goal of slavery had been to reduce the slave to the level of animal or property by denying him all sense of humanity and moral life. In an article published in *The North Star* on 29 September 1848, Douglass lamented that "shut up in the prison-house of bondage—denied all rights, and deprived of all privileges, we are blotted from the page of human existence, and placed beyond the limits of human regard. Death, moral death, has palsied our souls in that quarter, and we are a murdered people" (1: 332). And ten years later, he was to complain that "*slavery has bewitched us* [the American people]. It has taught us to read history backwards" (5: 402). The pressing question facing Douglass in the antebellum period was, then, how to raise a murdered people, how to reinsert blacks—both slave and free—back on the page of human existence, how to rewrite history so that it could once again be read forward. And Douglass knew that he could do so only by asserting himself as a man, that is, as a speaking and writing subject.

To do so, Douglass had, first of all, to prove that he was literally—biologically and physiologically—a man. In his early years of lecturing and writing in England, he made this argument by contrasting British recognition of his manhood to American ignorance. He sarcastically commented that even British dogs recognized him to be a man and wondered why the American people were unable to do so. When the *New York Sun*, in a hostile article of 13 May 1847, referred to him as a man, he ironically complimented the newspaper for having perceived that he was indeed a man as opposed to a monkey. Even as late as 1855, Douglass found it necessary to defend his manhood. In an article published that year, Douglass demonstrated the archimedean nature of his claim to being a man: He might be regarded as either a man or a thing, an object of property, but he could not be regarded as both. If a person, he maintained, he was entitled to all "the rights sacred to persons in the constitution" (2: 368). Following the example set by the slave in *The Columbian Orator's* dialogue, Douglass, asserting an existential claim to manhood, argues that the mere fact of being addressed constitutes evidence of his manhood, as it implicitly recognizes his ability to talk back. To illustrate his point, he makes use of the incident on board the *Cambria* in which "mobocratic" American slaveholders had attempted

to deny him the right to speak. He insists that the passengers on board the ship had every right to ask him to speak on the subject of slavery because "to deny that they had such right, would be to deny that they had the right to exchange views at all," a point that not even the slaveholders would uphold. Thus, Douglass continues, "if they had the right to ask, I had the right to answer, and to answer so as to be understood by those who wished to hear." Again following the lead of the slave in the dialogue, Douglass claims the right to speak on the subject of slavery; he himself has been a slave and can thus effectively represent not only himself but "three million of my brethren . . . in chains and slavery on the American soil" (1: 124, 189). Douglass's claim to speak on behalf of his enslaved brethren rests on memories of his own enslavement, as well as on his acute awareness that the prejudice under which they labor extends to free blacks as well.

Having thus asserted his manhood, Douglass then appropriated the Enlightenment discourse of liberty and equality—the discourse of the dominant culture—to shape it into a powerful counterdiscourse that would challenge the proslavery arguments of the period. He grounded the force of his argument and the sweep of his eloquence on a vision of human rights—self-evident, universal, and inalienable—that he had first come across in the pages of *The Columbian Orator* and later found in the rhetoric of the Declaration of Independence. As political theorists like Harry Jaffa have suggested, the Declaration is a clear embodiment of Locke's philosophy in *The Second Treatise of Civil Government*, which argues that all men are naturally in "a state of perfect freedom to order their actions . . . without asking leave, or depending upon the will of any other man. A state also of equality, wherein all power and jurisdiction is reciprocal, no one having more than another; there being nothing more evident than that creatures of the same species and rank . . . should also be equal one amongst another without subordination or subjection."<sup>6</sup> Jaffa further suggests that the Founding Fathers intended the Declaration to be a universalistic document and the American Revolution a war that was to secure these inalienable rights for some men while holding out the promise that they would one day be enjoyed by all.

Douglass understood the Declaration in just such a sense as well and felt that the time had finally come for these promises to become

realities. In a speech reprinted in the 2 August 1858 issue of the *New York Times*, Douglass affirmed that the Declaration of Independence was the great act that gave the American republic its existence. In it the Founding Fathers asserted that "all men are entitled to life, liberty, and to an equal chance for happiness." They regarded slavery as a transient rather than a permanent feature of American society and nowhere made provision for blacks to be enslaved or for the principles asserted in the document to be unequally applied: "They nowhere tell us that Black men shall be slaves and white men shall be free They say, 'we, the people,' never we, the white people" (5: 402).

By midcentury, Douglass had further extended his interpretation of the Declaration of Independence to include more revolutionary and self-empowering efforts to achieve black liberation and independence. In the aftermath of the raid on Harper's Ferry, Douglass praised John Brown's heroic actions as perfectly consistent with the principles of the Declaration of Independence: "He believes the Declaration of Independence to be true; and the Bible to be a guide to human conduct, and, acting upon the doctrines of both, he threw himself against the serried ranks of American oppression" (2: 459-60). And in increasingly militant terms, Douglass exhorted blacks to work for their own elevation and that of their enslaved brethren: "We must rise or fall, succeed or fail, by our own merits" (1: 314). In so doing, Douglass, like the slave in *The Columbian Orator's* dialogue, was affirming his belief in the power of human agency over that of Providence. In this he differed quite strikingly from other black leaders of the period, particularly clergymen, whose liberatory rhetoric was at all times interwoven with appeals to Providence and divine intervention. Although never totally abandoning the rhetoric of providentiality, Douglass remained more suspicious of the promiscuous uses to which it had been put over time and more inclined to rely on the power of human agency to achieve the goals of freedom and full citizenship.

In further analyzing the historical situation of the Declaration of Independence, however, Douglass found that he had good reason to reproach the Founding Fathers, for he came to believe that the very men who had framed the document were at the same time "trafficking in the blood and souls of their fellow men" (1: 207). To Douglass, then, America was one great falsehood, fashioned on a fundamental contra-

diction: On the one hand, it professed equality and liberty for all people; on the other, it practiced slavery, thereby denying those rights to many. To illustrate the extent to which slavery perverts the ideals on which the Republic was founded, Douglass repeatedly resorts to rhetorical schemas of antithesis. He asserts that slavery "has given us evil for good—darkness for light, and bitter for sweet" (5: 402) and underscores the contradiction between America's "profession of love of liberty" and its "statute-book so full of all that is cruel, malicious, and infernal" (1: 212). In fact, Douglass argues, slavery has replaced the Declaration of Independence as "the only sovereign power in the land." It has so permeated the entire fabric of American society that it "gives character to the American people. It dictates their laws, gives tone to their literature, and shapes their religion" (1: 168).

To reinforce his condemnation of proslavery discourse and practice, Douglass relied on a wide variety of techniques of reversal. These techniques were designed to show that the "reality" asserted by the dominant class is in fact often the exact opposite of that claimed and that, similarly, the effects sought by this dominant class often result in the exact opposite, thereby reversing the system of values it has tried so hard to impose and maintain. Thus Douglass mocks the use of such "honeyed words" as the "peculiar" or "patriarchal" institution to describe the slave system. In particular, he calls attention to the sexual abuses created by the slave system; a slaveholder is not an uncle or brother but rather "a keeper of a house of ill-fame," and his "kitchen is a brothel" (1: 271). Douglass shows that the system of slavery works not because it is "benevolent" but because it relies on the cold fact of "the whip": "To ensure good behavior, the slaveholder relies on *the whip*; to induce proper humility, he relies on *the whip*; to rebuke what he is pleased to term insolence, he relies on *the whip*" (2: 135). After the passage of the Fugitive Slave Act, he repeatedly refers to slaveholders as robbers, manstealers, highwaymen, and kidnappers. Tearing away their mask of gentility, he mocks southern gentlemen and ladies who appear at Saratoga Springs, New York, "arrayed in purple and fine linen . . . covered with silks, satins and broadcloth," but who are in reality "naked pirates before God and man" (2: 242). And he sarcastically refers to those politicians in the federal government who have southern sympathies as highwaymen, thieves, and robbers.



Returning to the analogy of blacks as animals, Douglass once again manages to reverse the terms of the dominant discourse to point out how slavery's dehumanization of slaves dehumanizes slaveholders even more. He shows how, under the slave system, slaves are "registered with four footed beasts and creeping things" and are reduced to a level of brutishness that justifies the accusations of degradation so often leveled against them (1: 282). Through skillful manipulation of rhetoric, however, he also illustrates how the slaveholders themselves become animals. He likens their cruelty toward their slaves to "the kick of a jackass, or the barking of a bull-dog" (3: 182) and asserts that, in their greed, slaveholders have become worse than pigs, for "your genuine American Negro hater surpasses the pig in piggishness" (4: 229). To entrust the well-being of slaves to slaveholders is, finally, tantamount to suggesting that "wolves may be trusted to legislate for themselves and . . . for lambs" (2: 329).

In yet another ironic reversal, Douglass shows how supposedly tyrannical countries are in fact resolutely advancing the causes of liberty and equality while democratic America is eagerly trampling on the principles of the Declaration of Independence: "The fact is, while Europe is becoming republican, we are becoming despotic; while France is contending for freedom, we are extending slavery. . . . While humanity, justice, and freedom are thawing the icy heart of Russia into life, and causing, even there, the iron hand of despotism to relax its terrible grasp upon the enslaved peasantry . . . we of the United States are buried in stone-dead indifference" (1: 305; 2: 440). And of all ironies, England, the erstwhile oppressor, has now become the champion of the slave. "Monarchical freedom," Douglass bitterly concludes, "is better than republican slavery" (1: 172).

The most important rhetorical strategy of Douglass's counter-discourse in the antebellum period was, perhaps, his use of dialogic techniques that allowed him to make eye contact not only with his audience but with his opponents as well, with those "masters" from whom he had had to wrench his freedom. In particular, he made use of the form of the "open letter" to engage in dialogue some of the most important men of his time. Although the term "open letter" did not come into use until the 1860s and 1870s, the form had existed for hundreds of years, in kind if not in name. It was most often used by a society's elite to

challenge an opponent's point of view in a political or religious controversy. Probably the first black American to make use of this form, Douglass fashioned it into a particularly effective counterdiscourse, claiming as his own a form that had proven useful to popes, bishops, noblemen, and political leaders throughout the last three hundred years. By adopting this form, Douglass was implicitly asserting his claim to equal status with all those who had used it before him.

As the most personal of literary forms, the letter implies by its very nature a back-and-forth, a give-and-take, a dialogue between two parties. With few exceptions, Douglass's open letters are addressed to individuals who would never deign to engage him in conversation, let alone answer him by letter. By means of this technique, Douglass was able to create hypothetical dialogues in which he invented his opponents' speeches or letters so that he could respond to them. The open letter thus became yet another effective means of entering into dialogue with those who wished to blot blacks from the page of human existence. Moreover, although each of Douglass's open letters is addressed to a particular individual, each is also addressed to a larger public concern, allowing Douglass to personify and make concrete larger issues that his readers might remain insensitive to in the abstract. By adopting the open letter format, then, Douglass used it, much as the slave in *The Columbian Orator* used the dialogue form, to constitute himself as a speaking and writing subject, engage his opponents in dialogue, and concretely claim for himself and for all blacks the principles of liberty and equality inscribed in the Declaration of Independence.

Douglass makes use of the open letter as early as 1846 in a series of letters to Garrison in which he diverges at given points from addressing his antislavery friend in order to address an antislavery opponent. Thus, in a letter dated 27 January 1846, Douglass turns away from Garrison to enter into dialogue with Mr. A.C.C. Thompson of Wilmington, who had attempted to invalidate Douglass's testimony against those slaveholders whose names were mentioned in the *Narrative*. Much like the slave in *The Columbian Orator's* dialogue, Douglass responds to Thompson, thanking him profusely for the attention he has paid him, which proves that he is in fact the man he claims to be, "an *American slave*," rather than an imposter. He then proceeds ironically to compliment Thompson for doing "a piece of anti-slavery work, which no anti-

slavery man could do" (1: 131). In another open letter, this one addressed to Samuel H. Cox, Douglass once again takes advantage of the fact that Cox has addressed him to engage him in dialogue, this time reclaiming Cox's words of insult and turning them into words of praise. In particular, he redefines the term "*abolition agitator and altruist*" to mean "simply . . . one who dares to think for himself—who goes beyond the mass of mankind in promoting the cause of righteousness—who honestly and earnestly speaks out his soul's conviction" (1: 192).

Douglass's boldest use of the open letter form may be found in two letters written in the late 1840s: one to Henry Clay, published in *The North Star* on 3 December 1847, the other to his former master, Captain Thomas Auld, published in *The Liberator* on 14 September 1849. In his letter to Clay, Douglass incorporates Clay's language into his own discourse, by quoting from it at length, and then proceeds to answer his points on the spot. The letter itself thus constitutes a kind of dialogue between master and slave. In it Douglass points out Clay's ideological inconsistencies. On the one hand, Clay calls slaves "unfortunate victims," but on the other, he continues to call for the perpetuation of slavery. Likewise, he purports to be a lover of liberty, but at the same time he insists that each state should have the power to decide whether it wants slavery within its borders or not. Faced with such an intellectual muddle, Douglass feels compelled to offer Clay advice, something that he would never have the opportunity to do in person; and his advice is "emancipate your own slaves" (1: 290). In his letter to Auld, Douglass adopts a more informal tone, audaciously asserting his intellectual and moral superiority over his old master. Intimating that his own antislavery activities have influenced Auld, he graciously compliments the latter on his emancipation of his slaves and then suggests that he make his conversion to antislavery public. In effect, in this open letter Douglass recreates the scene between master and slave in *The Columbian Orator*, in which the slave, having gained his freedom, turns around to lecture and warn his master.

In the 11 March 1853 issue of *The North Star*, Douglass published a short story entitled "The Heroic Slave," which also appeared the same year in Julia Griffith's *Autographs for Freedom*. Based on events surrounding the slave revolt on board the *Creole* in 1841, the story is important for the ways in which Douglass both continues and extends the themes

and strategies of his antebellum journalism; in particular, he turns to techniques of fiction to accomplish what factual writing would not allow him to do. Douglass was already aware of the power of fiction when, in his "Farewell Speech to the British People," published in *The London Times* in 1847, he imputed certain statements to Daniel Webster concerning Madison Washington, which then allowed him to underscore the basic contradictions at the heart of the slave system. In Webster's hypothetical speech, he praised Washington's courage and nobility, while at the same time he demanded that the slave be returned to the chains of slavery. In fictionalizing Washington's story in "The Heroic Slave," Douglass took full advantage of the freedom that fiction allowed him further to point out the contradictions inherent in the slave system and to press home the abolitionists' cause.<sup>7</sup>

Many themes and rhetorical devices that Douglass employs in the story continue those of his journalism. In particular, Douglass is most effective in adapting certain of his journalistic techniques to the manipulation of voice and point of view in the story. First, he creates a powerful black hero who, through soliloquy, speeches, and storytelling, is granted full status as speaking subject. In addition, Douglass's technique of the hypothetical dialogue comes into its own here, as Douglass is able to create not only dialogues but full-blown characters—black and white—who interact dramatically in scenes spun from his imagination. In Part 3, for example, Douglass's narrator moves the action to a tavern in Virginia and creates a series of dialogues between a white proslavery "loafer" and the abolitionist Listwell as well as conversations among the loafers themselves. The main point of these dialogues is to expose the foolishness of the loafers' perceptions, their inability to read Listwell properly, and ultimately their failure to achieve any semblance of narrative authority. They are reduced to telling each other "stories" that the narrator, as controlling authority, refuses to record because he considers them unworthy of the reader's attention. Listwell, in contrast, remains very much in control, able both to withhold information about himself and to achieve an invisible, omniscient perspective so that, unknown to them, he may learn a good deal about them. When Listwell disappears in Part 4 of the story, it is so that the narrative may record a second conversation among a group of white men, this time southern sailors. Amplifying once again the technique of the hypothetical dia-

logue, Douglass's narrator creates a conversation between a sailor and the first mate of the *Creole*, who, goaded by the former, ends up praising Washington's heroic act of self-assertion, defending his essential dignity and nobility, and unwittingly underscoring the contradiction inherent in white America's refusal to apply the principles of 1776 to the black man.

In "The Heroic Slave" Douglass also extends the narrative techniques of his journalism in his efforts both to transcend the highly personal perspective of the "I" and to develop the broader perspective of a third-person narrator. In portraying Madison Washington, Douglass creates a character who, although a fictional projection of himself in many ways, is nonetheless historically distinct from him. In so doing, Douglass initiates a process whereby he attempts to distance himself from his autobiographical and factual "I." Moving beyond the autobiographical "I," Douglass creates a third-person narrator who is especially important to the development of the Washington-Listwell relationship. A primary function of Listwell, who is converted to abolitionism after hearing Washington's soliloquy in the forest, is to *listen well*. He listens well to both Washington and the white loafers at the Virginia tavern. This is clearly the role that Douglass, the journalist and public speaker, wants white abolitionists to play: to listen well to what the black slave has to say. But Listwell's function as listener has other implications as well. For without Listwell's position as overhearer of Washington's soliloquy or as recipient of his stories, Washington would not be able to tell his tale. A mutual interdependence is thus established between Washington and Listwell, between slave and abolitionist: Without Washington, there is no story to tell; without Listwell, there is nobody to receive and relay the story. Most important, however, both Madison and Listwell depend on the narrator, the controlling authority of the story, who organizes, shapes, and comments on it according to his own ideological perspective. Douglass here creates in his fiction a narrative situation that he must have desired in his journalistic career both before and after the Civil War: an interdependent relationship between the black slave as a speaking and experiencing subject, on the one hand, and the white abolitionist, who both listens well and takes an active role in his cause, on the other, guided by an authoritative black leader whose role it is to write the black back onto the page of human existence.

Although Douglass would never again experiment with writing fiction, his achievement in this story marks a key transitional phase in his rhetorical stance as a journalist. Just as his third-person omniscient narrator in the story moves back and forth from one point of view to another, Douglass the journalist would soon allow his own work to move back and forth between several points of view—those of black and white, of “we” and “they”—as the exigencies of the Civil War, Reconstruction, and the post-Reconstruction debacle demand departures from the rhetorical strategies that had proven so effective before the war.

During the Civil War, rapid shifts in political events gradually came to dictate shifts in Douglass’s journalistic rhetoric. In one article, for example, Douglass follows a dramatic, searing condemnation of government policy toward slaves who escape across Union lines with a retraction based on just-received information that reflects a change in policy. Given such rapid changes of events, generalizations and abstract explanations were perhaps a wiser rhetorical strategy than an invocation of specific charges and *ad hominem* attacks. In addition, Douglass found that he could rely less frequently on his own experiences in slavery as the foundation on which to ground his arguments and instead had to find ways to broaden both his perspective and the issue of slavery itself. Thus the brutal facts and concrete metonyms of Douglass’s journalism of the 1840s give way to such abstract comments as “self-deception is a chronic disease of the American mind and character. . . . We are masters in the art of substituting a pleasant falsehood for an ugly and disagreeable truth, and of clinging to a fascinating delusion while rejecting a palpable reality” (3: 126).

Looking ahead to the end of slavery and the beginning of a new social system, Douglass suddenly found himself confronted with the question of how those who had for so long been outside of the social system could now become part of it. He alternates between his earlier rhetorical mode of castigating the federal government for its complicity with slavery, rebuking it for its hypocrisy, dishonesty, and failure of nerve, and a new impulse to see himself and other blacks as part of the government, which he now sometimes refers to as “we” and “our rulers” instead of “they.” Shifting between references to *the* government and *our* government, Douglass’s stance is more constrained than it was in the antebellum period, when the interlocutor of his dialogues was

clearly the slaveholding class and the government that supported it. As Douglass's own view of his place—and the place of other blacks—in America's democratic experiment changes, his strategies as a journalist change as well.

In this period, for example, Douglass still occasionally reverts to the form of the open letter, but with less and less frequency. The difference between his open letter to Postmaster General Blair, dated October 1862, and the earlier ones to Henry Clay and Thomas Auld is instructive: The Blair letter is a response to an actual letter sent to Douglass by a person in a position of power, who addresses him with respect and courtesy. Responding to Blair's arguments in favor of colonization and appealing to analogies from abroad to drive home his point, Douglass argues that if the free colored populations of Cuba and Brazil are not being subjected to expatriation schemes, why should the free black man in the United States be? The most interesting part of the letter is, however, the epistolary situation itself, in which Douglass is acutely aware that a man of Blair's stature has actually written to him and given him the occasion to respond. To underscore his sense of its importance, Douglass in the letter self-consciously places himself in a tradition of black men who have been addressed by great national leaders, recalling, for example, Jefferson's letter to Benjamin Banneker, in which the president "warmly commend[ed] his talents and learning" (3: 284).

During the Civil War period, buried among articles addressed to specific issues, such as black enlistment or colonization schemes, are several articles in which Douglass looks ahead to what lies in store for black Americans. In 1863, he had referred to "slavery and its twin monster prejudice" (3: 38). But although exposing slavery was something Douglass had honed into a highly developed art, exposing its "twin monster"—especially after Reconstruction—proved to be more complicated. Douglass may well have sensed this fact when in 1862 he pondered the question: "What shall be [the slaves'] status in the new condition of things? Shall they exchange the relation of slavery to individuals, only to become slaves of the community at large, having no rights which anybody is required to respect, subject to a code of Black laws, denying them school privileges, denying them the right of suffrage, denying them the right to keep and bear arms, denying them the right of speech, and

the right of petition? Or shall they have secured to them equal rights before the law?" (3: 40-41).

After the Civil War, with slavery officially abolished, Douglass struggled to reframe this question. It was a troubling and difficult task. Whereas slavery was a clear and present evil, the postwar evil was often too murky and complex to name: "The thing worse than rebellion is the thing that causes rebellion," he wrote. "What that thing is, we have been taught to our cost. It remains now to be seen whether we have the needed courage to have that cause entirely removed from the Republic". (4: 201). The "we" that Douglass invokes here is an inclusive "we," a "we" that situates itself squarely among the citizenry that gives the government its legitimacy and its power. Douglass often employs this "we" to shame his fellow citizens into sharing his revulsion at the activities of former rebels. For example, in 1871 he writes: "The spread of the lynch law at the South, the wholesale slaughter of loyal men, the open defiance by the people of the General Government, the organization of secret bands sufficiently powerful in every rebel State to control its policy and defeat the ends of justice, prove how foolish and practically wicked has been the impunity with which we have treated their crimes" (4: 258).

From the end of the Civil War until his death, Douglass struggled to find ways to describe and expose the realities of postwar race relations in America. In a series of articles in mainstream, predominantly white publications, such as *The North American Review* and *Harper's Weekly*, Douglass endeavored to explain the current state of blacks in America by reminding his audience of the degradation of a slave system from which blacks had so recently been liberated.

Much of Douglass's writing during this period gives policy advice and social analysis of the kind he had given in the past. But there is often a restraint, keyed perhaps to his efforts to withhold judgment during a period of enormous transition. Although the articles are clear and well argued, they lack the passion of his antebellum writing. Much of the fire that characterized his earliest triumphs as a journalist is absent. His analysis is often more abstract than previously, such as his vague recommendation that "time and endeavor must have their perfect working before we shall see the end of the effect of slavery and oppression in the United States"(4: 227).



In his most important articles, however, Douglass was able once again to find his stride as a masterfully eloquent journalist when he reclaimed as fact and metaphor the subject that had fueled his writing from the start: slavery. That which he had expressed as a hypothetical fear in 1862 had come to pass by the end of Reconstruction: black people had exchanged slavery to individuals for slavery to "the community at large." As he claimed slavery both as symbol and as reality, and retold the horrors of the past to reframe the horrors of the present, Douglass broadened his perspective on his country's social ills and ascended to new heights of rhetorical intensity and passion. He achieves his effectiveness of old when he recalls and extends those images that had served him in the antebellum period. He reminds his audience that slavery still scars the free black and does not hesitate to detail its brutal and gory facts: "he has scarcely been free long enough to outgrow the marks of the lash on his back and the fetters on his limbs. He stands before us, today, physically, a maimed and mutilated man. Slavery has twisted his limbs, shattered his feet, deformed his body and distorted his features" (4: 194). Douglass is also compelling in his use of slavery as a metaphor, as he reminds his audience that slavery is not only a bondage of the body, but an even "more terrible bondage of ignorance and vice" (4: 224).

In article after article, Douglass reaches new heights of moral indignation as he effectively shows how slavery has left a legacy of barbarism hanging like a black cloud over the slave states. This legacy, Douglass claims, burdens former slaves and slaveholders alike. Slave labor has been replaced by cheap labor that is motivated by "the same lust for gain, the same love of ease, and loathing of labor, which originated that infernal traffic." Like slave labor, cheap labor brings "ease and luxury to the rich, wretchedness and misery to the poor" (4: 264–65). For slaveholders, the barbarism of slavery has left a "brutalizing, stupefying, and debasing effect upon their natures" (4: 243). Blind to their own interests, slaveholders are expelling northern emigrants from the South, engaging in burnings, lynchings, and wholesale murders. Such is the legacy of "besotted madness" that slavery has pinned upon the former slaveholding oligarchy of the South.

Douglass is equally effective in his postbellum journalism as he intensifies his efforts on behalf of women's suffrage. Aware that all his prior

actions have been either on behalf of himself or his people, Douglass notes that in supporting women's suffrage "self [is] out of the question" and that a broader perspective than that of the personal "I" is necessary (4: 452). Douglass achieves this broader perspective as he once again reclaims the arguments and images of his antislavery journalism and applies them to women's causes. He asserts that women are human beings and do not need "protection" in the ways that animals do; he insists that if women are indeed human beings, then they must be intellectual and moral and therefore capable of making their own choices; finally, he argues that the true doctrine of American liberty demands that women, like blacks, be allowed to represent themselves.

Throughout his journalism of this period, then, Douglass's "I" is at its most authoritative when he once again positions himself as an outsider and presses arguments for reasons why blacks—and women—should become part of the "we." His rhetoric is most effective in those instances when he is most acutely aware that blacks still remain outside the "we" and must continue their fight to become a part of it, to break down the "color line" whose origins are rooted in the slave system. Against those who assert that race prejudice is both universal and natural, Douglass retorts that it is neither. In a tightly reasoned article entitled "The Color Line," he argues that prejudice is in fact a learned response that exists neither worldwide nor at all times. In the United States it is the result of a social system that had effectively sought "to enslave [the black man], to blot out his personality, degrade his manhood, and sink him to the condition of a beast of burden" (4: 347). The shadow of this system, still lingering over the country, poisons the moral atmosphere of the Republic and prevents genuine emancipation.

The "we" who hold those famous "truths to be self-evident" is, in several ways, a different "we" after the war than before. This "we" now includes millions of former slaves, and this "we" is sobered and chastened by the pain and death of strife. But rather than abandon the habits that animated his antebellum journalism, Douglass now recasts them in a new light. The dialogic power of his rhetoric is now trained not on one class and the government's support of it, but on the society as a whole. For the new "we," as Douglass well understands, embraces not only former slaves but also the forces of history that allowed them to be enslaved. Facing up to that history requires a constant vigilance to-

ward all people and institutions that exploit, defraud, and degrade in the name of "civilization." The society Douglass wants to bring into being is a self-reflective political culture in which first principles are frequently invoked, deep questioning is both accepted and expected, and probing the gaps between the country's stated ideals and the actual condition of its people is the responsibility of every citizen. It is to membership in this new "we" that Douglass would have all of us aspire.

### Notes

This essay first appeared, in slightly different form, in *Frederick Douglass: New Literary and Historical Essays*, ed. Eric J. Sundquist (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990). Reprinted with the permission of Cambridge University Press.

1. Philip S. Foner, *The Life and Writings of Frederick Douglass*, 5 volumes (New York: International Publishers, 1950-1975), 5: 3. All further references to Douglass's journalism are to this edition and are cited parenthetically in the text.
2. Frederick Douglass, *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, an American Slave, Written by Himself* (New York: Anchor Books, 1973), 68. All further references to *The Narrative* are to this edition and are cited parenthetically in the text.
3. Caleb Bingham, *The Columbian Orator* (New York: E. Duyckinck, 1816), title page. All further references to *The Columbian Orator* are to this edition and are cited parenthetically in the text.
4. M. M. Bakhtin, *The Dialogic Imagination*, trans. Michael Holquist (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1981), 324-35.
5. Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality*, 3 vols. (New York: Vintage Books, 1980), 1: 101.
6. Locke quoted in Harry V. Jaffa, *Crisis of the House Divided* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1959), 314-15.
7. For another analysis of "The Heroic Slave," see Robert B. Stepto, "Storytelling in Early Afro-American Fiction: Frederick Douglass's 'The Heroic Slave,'" in *Black Literature and Literary Theory*, ed. Henry Louis Gates (New York: Methuen, 1984), 175-86.

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