Introduction

Frederick Douglass's Oratory and Political Leadership

Frederick Douglass's death in 1895 inspired many retrospective accounts of his remarkable life and career. Activists, educators, musicians, ministers, and politicians offered tributes to Douglass and his work on behalf of African Americans and other oppressed groups. He was remembered as a civil rights leader who paired powerful public speaking with a gift for bridging racial divides; in the wake of his death, his contemporaries identified his oratory as his distinctive legacy and his most effective political tool. Of the memorials collected and published in 1897 by Helen Pitts Douglass, his second wife, a majority focused on his speeches. The Reverend Hugh T. Stevenson, pastor of the Baptist Church of Anacostia, Washington, D.C., remarked: "Gifted with elements that would have made him a master in any walk of life, his work developed in him three prominent characteristics: breadth of sympathy, dauntless courage, and oratorical power."[1] Robert Purvis expanded upon those characteristics, praising Douglass's "sonorous voice," with its "wonderful flexibility," and comparing him to Daniel Webster, the Massachusetts senator and distinguished orator: "In originality of thought, of

1. Helen Pitts Douglass, ed., *In Memoriam: Frederick Douglass* (Philadelphia: Yorston, 1897), 29.

expression, in epigrammatic sentences, Mr. Douglass was his equal; in his ability to personate a character, he was his superior."[2] Purvis also compared Douglass to the great Shakespearean actors of his day, adding, "His dramatic power, in both its phases (tragic and comic), was marvelous. . . . I have witnessed passages in the oratory of Mr. Douglass, which, for simple dramatic power transcended their finest efforts; and, for the simple reason that they were acting; and his part was the majestic outburst from the well-spring of a grand, broad, deeply moved human nature."[3]

Other commentators noted the dramatic setting of so many of Douglass's greatest speeches. Often, hecklers interrupted Douglass, and opponents violently threatened his and his colleagues' safety; one such mob attack in Pendleton, Indiana, which permanently injured Douglass, is recounted in part 3 of this volume. His rhetorical performances were often crafted under extraordinary pressures that, far from undermining him, helped him produce his best work.

Though contemporaries frequently remembered Douglass for his declamations and thundering tones, those more familiar with the breadth of his oratorical career remarked upon his gift for extemporaneous speech, especially his comic impersonations of slaveholders and other racists. Purvis commented, "So perfect was the comic in his nature, and so keen was the sense of the ludicrous, that he excited the greatest fun and laughter."[4] The *National Anti-Slavery Standard* (28 October 1847) described his bearing during a speech mocking slaveholders' religion: "Mr. Douglass here assumed a most grotesque look . . . and . . . a canting tone of voice." In this instance, Douglass invoked the discursive form of the sermon satire to mock an eighteenth-century bishop who defended "evangelical flogging." He quotes the bishop addressing slaves:

2. Ibid., 213.
3. Ibid., 217.
4. Ibid., 218.

> "Whether you really deserve it or not," (one would think that would make some difference), "it is your duty, and Almighty God requires that you bear it patiently. You may perhaps think that this is a hard doctrine," (and it admits of little doubt), "but if you consider it right you must needs think otherwise of it." (It is clear as mud. I suppose he is now going to reason them into the propriety of being flogged evangelically.) "Suppose you deserve correction; you cannot but see it is just and right you should meet with it. Suppose you do not, or at least so much or so severe; you perhaps have escaped a great many more, and are at last paid for all. Suppose you are quite innocent; is it not possible you may have done some other bad thing which was never discovered, and Almighty God would not let you escape without punishment one time or another? Ought you not in such cases to give glory to Him?" (Glory!) (Much laughter.)[5]

Douglass explains that this approach exposes deceptions practiced to maintain slavery: "There is nothing that will facilitate our cause more than getting the people to laugh at that religion which brings its influence to support traffic in human flesh."[6] Granville Ganter, whose essay is located in part 5 of this volume, explores the way Douglass used humor to confound the audience's conception of slavery, thus disrupting proslavery thought.

5. Frederick Douglass, "Love of God, Love of Man, Love of Country: An Address Delivered in Syracuse, New York, on 24 September 1847," in John W. Blassingame and John R. McKivigan, eds., *The Frederick Douglass Papers,* 9 vols. (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 1979–), ser. 1, 2:98–99; hereinafter cited as *Douglass Papers.* For the original sermon, see William Meade, ed., *Sermons Addressed to Masters and Servants and Published in the Year 1743, by the Reverend Thomas Bacon, Minister of the Protestant Episcopal Church in Maryland, Now Republished with Other Tracts and Dialogues on the Same Subject, and Recommended to all Masters and Mistresses, to Be Used in their Families* (Winchester, Va.: John Heiskell, Printer, 1813), 132–33.

6. Douglass, "Love of God, Love of Man, Love of Country," in *Douglass Papers,* ser. 1, 2:98–99.

The Novice Speaker: From "Text" to Advocate

Douglass began his speaking career shortly after his escape from slavery in Baltimore and his arrival in the shipbuilding community of New Bedford, Massachusetts. In 1838 he began attending the New Bedford African Methodist Episcopal Zion Church, a small all-black congregation, and became a licensed local preacher in 1839.[7] Speaking at this church in an antislavery meeting, Douglass was persuaded by the white Quaker William C. Coffin to attend the upcoming abolitionist convention to be held in August 1841 in Nantucket. Douglass made such a powerful impression that he was introduced to several of the leading figures of the American Anti-Slavery Society—William Lloyd Garrison, Wendell Phillips, and Parker Pillsbury—and briefly addressed their gathering. By the close of the convention, these abolitionists had asked Douglass to become a paid lecturer for their organization.[8] The older Garrison mentored Douglass, and the two formed a close friendship as Douglass learned to convert audiences to fervent antislavery beliefs, even while risking violent public attacks in the process.

In 1844 the American Anti-Slavery Society adopted the motto "No Union with Slaveholders." The society believed that the American system of government was founded on the protection of slavery and that the U.S. Constitution committed the country to defending it. Consequently, any direct political participation through voting or office holding was a form of collusion, an expression of "union with slaveholders." Members of the society, also known as Garrisonians, likewise criticized Christian churches in the United States, which they saw as ideologically upholding slavery. The Garrisonians supported a range of reforms, most especially women's rights.

7. William L. Andrews, "Frederick Douglass, Preacher," *American Literature* 54, no. 4 (December 1982): 596.

8. William S. McFeely, *Frederick Douglass* (New York: Norton, 1991), 89.

Their theory of reform was based on moral suasion: if they revealed the true horrors of slavery and appealed to what is best and most sympathetic in listeners, a moral revolution would sweep the North and eventually the nation, eliminating the need for participation in electoral politics or legislative initiatives. Engaging in direct politics, they believed, would involve compromises detrimental to the moral purity of the movement.

Douglass thrived under Garrison's mentorship and became such a successful and brilliant antislavery lecturer that skeptics doubted he could have been raised in the brutalizing environment of plantation slavery. To prove his slave origins, he published *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass* (1845), which became the most famous slave autobiography in American history. In it he described in detail his early years as a slave in Talbot County and Baltimore, Maryland, as well as his life in the North after his escape from slavery, at approximately age twenty. (Douglass never definitively knew his age.) Publication of the narrative made Douglass identifiable, which made him vulnerable to being captured and returned into slavery. As a result, Douglass left his young family and traveled to Great Britain in August 1845.

In twenty-one months overseas, Douglass spoke at hundreds of events in Ireland, Scotland, and England. Initially addressing crowds gathered by his Garrisonian friends, he later found that the popularity of his *Narrative* won him large audiences drawn to hear the abolitionist testimony of a genuine victim of slavery. The talents he displayed in Britain as a public speaker won Douglass the opportunity to lecture audiences on other topics; one 1846 address, reprinted in this volume, demonstrates the controversy that Douglass sparked when he drew parallels between temperance and abolitionism. Historians have aptly labeled this journey to Britain and Ireland a "Liberating Sojourn." Douglass won widespread acclaim, enjoyed life in a society with little overt racism, and returned home a free man after his English admirers purchased his

freedom.[9] Consequently, when he returned to the United States in April 1847, he was far less willing than before to act as a junior partner to his original antislavery mentor, William Lloyd Garrison. Douglass commented that early in his career, Garrison would take him as his "text," a short verse upon which Garrison grafted the meaning of abolition.[10] By the time he returned from Britain, he was a celebrity, a powerful advocate for African American freedom.

Douglass generally delivered his early antislavery speeches without notes, refining key stories and testing to see which provoked the most favorable audience response. Some of these central stories then found their way into his autobiographies. For example, the 1842 episode in which he broke down prejudice in Pittsfield, New Hampshire, described in the speech "Let the Negro Alone" (included in this work), later appeared in his final autobiography, the *Life and Times of Frederick Douglass.* Douglass discovered a further synergy between his publications and his speeches when his autobiography reached Southern audiences, which his speeches could not do. A former neighbor from Talbot County, A. C. C. Thompson, attempted to respond to the *Narrative* and inadvertently verified much of Douglass's story. A delighted Douglass wrote to Garrison: "Slaveholders and slave-traders never betray greater indiscretion, than when they venture to defend themselves, or their system of plunder, in any other community than a slaveholding one."[11] He then incorporated Thompson's observations regarding his transformation from "recreant slave" to "learned" man into his later addresses in Britain.[12]

As Douglass grew more famous, he was invited to speak at more formal occasions and deliver important keynote addresses. At the

9. Alan J. Rice and Martin Crawford, eds., *Liberating Sojourn: Frederick Douglass and Transatlantic Reform* (Athens: University of Georgia Press), 1999.

10. *Douglass Papers,* ser. 2, 2:206.

11. "Frederick Douglass to William Lloyd Garrison," 27 January 1846, *Douglass Papers,* ser. 3, 1:82.

12. Douglass, "A Few Facts and Personal Observations of Slavery: An Address Delivered in Ayr, Scotland," 24 March 1846, *Douglass Papers,* ser. 1, 1:201.

same time, he was subjected to greater scrutiny from the Garrisonians because of his moves toward independence from them and his changing philosophy of reform. Faced with these new pressures, he began using notes in his speeches. His 1852 classic, "What to the Slave Is the Fourth of July?" was one of the first major speeches for which he used notes. The preparation of other speeches such as "Claims of the Negro, Ethnologically Considered" required extensive research. The speeches for which we have records after 1852 are, by and large, those he delivered from notes. Exceptions include stump speeches, such as his 1872 "Which Greeley Are We Voting For?" and convention debates, such as "We Welcome the Fifteenth Amendment," both located in this volume.

Political Activist: Declaring Independence from the Garrisonians

As Douglass evolved as a leader, his relations with Garrison changed, as did his attitude toward electoral politics. When Douglass first proposed editing his own newspaper, he was discouraged by Garrison, who argued that Douglass would have difficulty securing readers and sufficient financial support. Their friendship faltered when Douglass, suspecting that Garrison was motivated in part by a desire to protect his own subscription base, disregarded his friend's advice. The break between the two men encouraged Douglass to think carefully about the limits of moral suasion as a means of ending slavery. Passage of the Compromise of 1850 made it clear that slavery was a national institution and that proslavery advocates aimed to make it legal in the North as well as the South. Douglass determined that the best way to eliminate slavery was to seek a political solution in addition to maintaining the moral suasion campaign focused on stigmatizing the institution.

After relocating to Rochester, Douglass associated more and more with a circle of upstate New York abolitionists led by the

wealthy land speculator Gerrit Smith. Smith had kept alive the remnant of the original Liberty party, founded in 1840 by abolitionists seeking political means to battle slavery. In 1848 most Liberty party adherents had entered into an alliance with Northern defectors from the Whig and Democrat parties on a Free Soil platform opposed to the spread of slavery into western territories. Douglass was attracted by this show of growing resistance to slavery's political power. Smith and his followers advanced the radical position that the Constitution offered no special protection for slave owning and that the federal government had the power to emancipate the slaves. Smith befriended Douglass and lobbied hard to persuade him to become an advocate for this brand of radical political abolitionism.[13]

The catalyst for Douglass's final break with the Garrisonians came when the American Anti-Slavery Society met in May 1851 and, seeking to clarify the position of its members, required them to denounce the Constitution. Douglass refused. In an article in the next issue of the *North Star* titled "Change of Opinion Announced," he supported the argument that the Constitution was an antislavery document, a view that permitted overt electoral action.[14] Two weeks after that, in another move of independence, Douglass merged his newspaper with that of Smith's Liberty party, naming the new publication *Frederick Douglass' Paper.*

At the same time, he became more active in the American and Foreign Anti-Slavery Society, a rival antislavery group dominated by the wealthy New York City merchants Arthur and Lewis Tappan. The "new organization," which had split from the American Anti-Slavery Society in 1840, was in many ways less socially radical than its parent organization: it was less critical of religious institu-

13. Lawrence J. Friedman, *Gregarious Saints: Self and Community in American Abolitionism, 1830–1870* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1982), 96–126; John Stauffer, *The Black Hearts of Men: Radical Abolitionists and the Transformation of Race* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2002), 158–68.

14. McFeely, *Frederick Douglass,* 169.

tions and did not support women's rights. Douglass attempted to work with both groups, but met with hostile resistance from his old friends the Garrisonians. He ends "A Nation in the Midst of a Nation" (1853), delivered at the American and Foreign Anti-Slavery Society annual meeting, by expressing reluctance to speak as anything other than a "colored man." He hoped to work with both antislavery societies yet, realistically, lamented the likely impossibility of doing so: "If one discards me because I work with the other, the responsibility is not mine."[15]

Revolutionary: Armed Resistance and Marginalization

In his first years as an abolitionist lecturer, Douglass resisted those who sought to force him into endorsing violent resistance to slavery. Though the turning point in his *Narrative* was his fight with the slave breaker Covey, he realized that overtly endorsing slave insurrection in the South would cause him to be labeled an incendiary and would marginalize his voice. During his time as a Garrisonian, Douglass tried to abide by the group's pacifist ideology, but found it necessary on occasion, such as when facing an antiabolitionist mob in Pendleton, Indiana, in 1842, to fight back in self-defense. The egregious nature of the Fugitive Slave Law finally led Douglass and many other abolitionists to sanction armed resistance, as a last resort, to prevent the rendition of a runaway. In his 1852 novella *The Heroic Slave,* Douglass went further and praised the courage of Madison Washington and the other rebellious slaves aboard the brig *Creole,* who fought for and won their freedom. It was Douglass's close friendship with the white abolitionist John Brown that highlighted the danger of becoming marginalized for advocating violent means to end slavery. In October 1859, Brown and a group

15. "Anniversaries," *Frederick Douglass' Paper,* 27 May 1853.

of twenty-one men, black and white, captured the federal armory at Harpers Ferry, Virginia, and attempted to seize munitions with which to start a widespread slave insurrection in the Appalachian Mountains. Douglass had been tempted to help Brown, but withheld his support when he realized Brown's plans had shifted from orchestrating slave escapes from secret bases in the Southern mountains to a direct military assault on Harpers Ferry.

Following Brown's quick defeat, Douglass fled to Britain to escape possible prosecution. There he discovered that because of his defection from the Garrisonians and his support of Brown's violent antislavery tactics, he was snubbed by many abolitionists who had welcomed him in 1845. Douglass's 1860 speech depicting the Constitution as an antislavery document served two purposes: to reaffirm his loyalty to the Union and to defend his views against the international criticism of moral suasionists on both sides of the Atlantic. He attacked George Thompson, a famed British Garrisonian who had challenged Douglass's position on the Constitution. As an instrumental form of rhetoric, the speech successfully defended the Constitution as a potentially antislavery platform for the nation. But it left Douglass the orator with a greatly reduced constituency. As the communications scholars Michael C. Leff and Ebony A. Utley define the term, "constitutive rhetoric" constructs the identity of the speaking self in relation to audience.[16] Douglass's speaking self was not winning allies in his fight against slavery or for African American civil rights. Audience members may have found his argument persuasive, but he did not put forth a conception of speaker and audience that inspired a clear collective identity. Too far from the African American community and too angry at the Garrisonians, Douglass found himself marginalized until he returned home, where he was embraced by Unionists and African Americans supportive of

16. Michael C. Leff and Ebony A. Utley, "Instrumental and Constitutive Rhetoric in Martin Luther King Jr.'s 'Letter from Birmingham Jail,'" *Rhetoric and Public Affairs* 7, no. 1 (Spring 2004): 38.

the Civil War. By making resistance to the South, even violent resistance, patriotic, the Civil War saved Douglass's leadership.

African American Organizer: Douglass in the Civil War and Reconstruction

The war years were a high-water mark for Douglass's leadership among African Americans. He traveled around the country to recruit black soldiers for the Union Army and to advocate for their equal treatment and opportunity in the military. Douglass developed an uneasy relationship with the Lincoln administration. He tried doggedly in the war's early years to convince the president and the Northern public that the mission of the war was emancipation of the slaves, which, in turn, would redeem the nation and save the Union. In his newspaper, Douglass railed against Lincoln for his "slothful deliberation" over the Emancipation Proclamation and his failure to protect or avenge black soldiers who had been massacred after they surrendered in battle.[17] In retrospect, after the success of the Thirteenth, Fourteenth, and Fifteenth Amendments, Douglass conceded that Lincoln had been an inspired leader precisely because the president had been so keenly aware of the nuances of public opinion and had gauged his advances accordingly. Lincoln became a touchstone in Douglass's rhetoric from his assassination onward.

Only a small number of Douglass's speeches explicitly directed toward African Americans were ever recorded or published. Even in "A Nation in the Midst of a Nation," when Douglass describes a budding black nationalism, he notes, "I am a colored man, and this is a white audience." Rather than rouse African Americans to

17. From *Life and Writings of Frederick Douglass,* ed. Philip S. Foner (New York: International Publishers, 1952), 3:274.

unified action, he alternately chastises white listeners and solicits greater understanding from them. In many speeches there is a palpable sense of a double audience, especially during Reconstruction, when Douglass had the greatest access to political power. The 1876 speech "The Freedmen's Monument to Abraham Lincoln" explicitly distinguishes between a white "you" and a black "we:" "You are the children of Abraham Lincoln. We are at best only his step-children . . . But . . . while Abraham Lincoln saved for you a country, he delivered us from a bondage, according to Jefferson, one hour of which was worse than ages of the oppression your fathers rose in rebellion to oppose." In other speeches, Douglass seems to repudiate binary, black-white thinking on race; for example, he includes himself among "we poor white people in the South" in "Which Greeley Are We Voting For?," delivered in Richmond, Virginia.

Relatively few of Douglass's speech texts are specifically directed at black audiences, which may reflect the limits of the written archive more than the scope of his oratory. He makes reference, for example, in his 1873 Louisville speech, "Recollections of the Anti-slavery Conflict," to a distinction between things he shares in public oratory and things he says in private conference. He first notes a form of inequality:

> We say we are the equals of the whites. Are we at present the equals of the whites? Equal before the law we are, equal at the ballot box we are, but we are far behind our white brethren. Now in what are we behind? . . If the white man can build magnificent halls like this and we cannot, they are halls ahead of us. I do not say that naturally we are unequal to the white man. I would not say that, but the fact is that now they are in advance of us.

Initially, Douglass sounds as if he subscribes to uplift ideology, an understanding that African Americans must take it upon themselves, without recompense for their exploitation and without equal opportunity, to become wealthier, better educated, and more respected.

But Douglass repeatedly calls into question the reasons for inequality of condition. He concludes this portion of the speech with a remarkable indication of his frustration in both bridging racial constituencies and effectively leading African Americans: "I would like to talk to you when there were no white people listening to me. I would like to talk to you aside." We might conclude that Douglass's speeches to and conversations with black constituents went unreported because he did not want his words misconstrued.

During Reconstruction, Douglass became an effective campaigner for the Republican party, the Fifteenth Amendment, and black civil rights more generally. So long as the Republican party supported African American rights and power in the South, Douglass's position as Republican stalwart served to reinforce his position among African Americans. Though Douglass's influence had suffered in 1859–60 in the wake of the John Brown scandal, the most sustained challenge came with the collapse of Reconstruction in 1877. With the federal withdrawal from the South, Southern white "Redeemers" steadily disenfranchised African Americans through poll taxes, literacy tests, and violence. Throughout the country, African Americans lost political and economic power and faced growing levels of social stigmatization. Since Douglass had campaigned for the Republicans and accepted significant political appointments, some viewed him as tacitly assenting to the Republican withdrawal from the South and, along with it, the end of federal protection of African American civil rights. The first threat to his leadership came after the John Brown raid, from white people who suspected that his defense of African Americans was too radical and violent; this second crisis, however, came from black people who suspected that he was too indebted to the Republicans.

This tension between Douglass and many of his peers reached a peak with the controversy over the "Exodusters," a term for African Americans from Louisiana, Mississippi, and Texas who attempted to migrate to Kansas in the wake of violent persecution in the Gulf states. Migrants experienced severe hardships en route, but

Douglass resisted contributing to relief efforts. He believed that the concentration of African Americans in the South and their extensive experience with agriculture gave them leverage in defending their rights, an advantage that would be absent in other regions of the country; encouraging migration was tantamount to giving up on reforming the South. Critics called him a "traitor" to his race.[18] As Douglass noted in his third autobiography, *Life and Times:* "In all my forty years of thought and labor to promote the freedom and welfare of my race, I never found myself more widely and painfully at variance with leading colored men of the country."[19]

As the gains of Reconstruction continued to unravel in the 1880s and 1890s, Douglass was again openly accused of failing to represent the interests of African Americans. He met this challenge by increasingly speaking out against Republican failures. After the Supreme Court overturned the 1875 Civil Rights Act, for example, he challenged his fellow Republicans in "This Decision Has Humbled the Nation" (1883). Frustrated, Douglass even charged that the Republicans had become a "party of money rather than a party of morals."[20]

A Return to Radicalism: The Final Years

While never severing his relationship with the Republican party—Douglass served briefly as U.S. minister to Haiti in 1889–90 and campaigned for Benjamin Harrison in 1892—his last years show his rededication to agitation. He continued to speak on behalf of women's rights, calling himself a "radical woman suffrage man," and mentored Ida B. Wells while collaborating with her to fight lynching. The last speech included in this collection, "Lessons of the Hour" (1893), is as radical as any delivered against slavery.

18. *"'Going for' Fred Douglass," Washington (D.C.) Post,* 19 May 1879.
19. *Douglass Papers,* ser. 2, 3:335.
20. "The Negro Problem," Washington (D.C.) *Evening Star,* 10 January 1894.

Douglass, unlike the rising African American leader Booker T. Washington, presented an analysis of lynching that was deeply offensive to many white listeners, Republicans included. He branded lynching a means of terrorizing African Americans in order to prevent political, economic, or social progress. Douglass argued that accusations of black men sexually assaulting white women, the most frequent justification offered for lynching, were usually false and that lynching was actually a manifestation of white guilt for the rape of black women during slavery and afterward.

Throughout Douglass's long public career, Americans experienced a decided shift in their understanding of social change. When Douglass first took to the speaking podium, Americans heard from Ralph Waldo Emerson and other Romantics that social change occurred when men's minds found victory over material circumstances. They argued that representative men could enact social change through their ability to first imagine and then, as Emerson urged, build their "own world."[21] This was a belief system especially friendly to reformers. By the end of his life, Douglass faced a public increasingly skeptical of social movements, unless reform could be defined as individual effort toward self-improvement. Glen McClish notes the limitations of Douglass and Wells's 1893 pamphlet "The Reasons Why the Colored American Is not in the World's Columbian Exposition: The Afro-American's Contribution to Columbian Literature." He argues that it failed to mobilize African Americans because it asserted a collective identity based on what McClish calls "a confident sense of agency" and a "powerful voice." As McClish shows, responses in the black press to Douglass and Wells's work promoted individual achievement and characterized attempts to influence those in power as "not only futile but downright dangerous."[22] Many middle-class black leaders regarded

21. Ralph Waldo Emerson, "Nature," in *Selected Writings of Emerson,* ed. Donald McQuade (New York: Random House, 1981), 42.

22. Glen McClish, "The Instrumental and Constitutive Rhetoric of Martin Luther King Jr. and Frederick Douglass," *Rhetorica* 33, no. 1 (Winter 2015): 67, 65.

collective action as impotent, making the work of agitation and organizing exceedingly difficult. Douglass's renaissance as an agitator in his twilight years, despite such discouraging developments, can be appreciated in retrospect as a return to his truest impulses and as an inspiration to Wells and later black leaders who would take up the mantle of civil rights reform in the twentieth century.

Recalling Douglass the Orator

Douglass seemed well aware that his exceptional talents as a public speaker had won him much of his fame and influence. Part 3 of this collection includes several excerpts from Douglass's reflections on his experiences as a speaker and the reasons for the successes and occasional failings of his oratorical performances. For example, in 1849 he proclaimed: "The pen is not to be despised, but who that knows anything of the might and electricity of speech as it bursts from hearts of fire, glowing with light and life, will not acknowledge the superiority over the pen for immediate effect." Twenty years later, however, he mused mournfully: "People do not attend lectures to hear statesmanlike addresses, which are usually rather heavy for the stomachs of young and old who listen. People want to be amused as well as instructed. They come as often for the former as the latter, and perhaps as often to see the man as for either." Well aware of the centrality of oratory to his political contributions, Douglass was the first compiler of his own speaking record. The four newspapers he edited over the years contained texts of scores of his addresses. With the financial assistance of his supporters, Douglass published and circulated key speeches in pamphlet versions. His second and third autobiographies, *My Bondage and My Freedom* and *Life and Times of Frederick Douglass,* quote from Douglass's orations and reprint numerous lengthy excerpts of the ones he deemed most significant. Highly conscious of his place in history, Douglass reproduced what

he regarded as his most eloquent public statements on the major issues of his day.[23]

An early first biography of Douglass, published by James M. Gregory two years before Douglass's death, contains a collection of speech extracts representing his most memorable speeches from the 1840s to the 1890s. Gregory, a professor of economics and history at Howard University, published *Frederick Douglass, the Orator* in 1893, weaving together Douglass's life story with approximately one hundred pages of speech excerpts that he suggested were the culmination of Douglass's reform labors. Booker T. Washington's 1907 biography of Douglass quoted copiously from Douglass's speeches, too. When Carter G. Woodson edited *Negro Orators and Their Orations* in 1925, eight of the seventy-six speeches he excerpted were by Douglass. Of these eight, only two were from the thirty years Douglass led African Americans after the Civil War. Woodson's choice of selections suggests that after the Civil War, Douglass became a smaller part of a more robust African American leadership circle. In 1955, Philip S. Foner became the first editor to collect and print a large selection of speeches in their entirety and to place them alongside other writings by Douglass. With the five-volume series of speeches, debates, and interviews edited by John W. Blassingame and John R. McKivigan (1979–92), annotated versions of a wide selection of speeches became widely available to scholars for the first time.

This volume gathers together historical context in the headnotes, provides annotations, and offers other contextual materials as a way to focus on the rhetorical "scenario" of Douglass's oratory. As the theater and performance scholar Diana Taylor defines the term, the "scenario" of a speech describes its text, the space in which it was

23. Two speeches Douglass chose to reproduce in *My Bondage and My Freedom* and one in *Life and Times of Frederick Douglass* are among the twenty selected for this volume. Douglass provided interesting background details about the composition of several other of his major address in these autobiographies.

performed, and the gestures, manner, and accent of the speaker.[24] Headnotes in this volume indicate, where possible, the staging of the speeches, newspaper reports of Douglass's actions and voice, and audience response.

Modern appraisals of Douglass as a speaker are inextricably linked with assessments of his leadership. The essays selected for part 5 of this volume examine this linkage. Gregory Lampe, for example, shows how Douglass's initial training as a speaker was derived from manipulating and imitating white children: he coaxed some to teach him to write and overheard others explaining how they were going to practice speeches for an exhibition, speeches found in *The Columbian Orator.* Granville Ganter balances this attention to learning dominant-culture practices with a consideration of Douglass's education within black communities. His early religious training in Baltimore with Father Lawson, his work as a Sabbath school leader, and then his position as lay preacher gave him considerable practice in fostering a sense of collective mission. He was already a compelling speaker, a leader among New Bedford African Americans, when white abolitionists first met him. He had cultivated the form of the slave sermon satire before he was hired to be a traveling antislavery lecturer.

Scholars have often compared Douglass with later African American orators, noting his specific rhetorical strategies and constitutive poses relative to his audiences. Ivy Wilson, David Howard-Pitney, and Richard Leeman, all included in part 5, represent this approach to Douglass's oratory. Wilson considers Douglass's development to be one sharpened and brought into relief through his association with sometime allies, sometime rivals such as Samuel Ringgold Ward and Henry Highland Garnet. Howard Pitney shows how he tapped into the religio-political jeremiad, standing at the head of an African American tradition credited with some of the most stirring

24. Diana Taylor, *The Archive and the Repertoire: Performing Cultural Memory in the Americas* (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 2003), 16, 20.

speeches ever delivered, including Martin Luther King Jr.'s "I Have a Dream." In a less celebratory approach, Richard Leeman finds Douglass's response to the dominant rhetoric of social Darwinism less confrontational and thus less politically advantageous than that of later leaders such as Henry McNeal Turner, Ida B. Wells and W. E. B. Du Bois.

The study of Douglass's speeches encourages a close examination of Douglass's post–Civil War career because at many of these speech events, he was defending his political positions and his philosophy of reform to other African Americans, reformers, and Republicans. His call to agitation and confrontation fell out of favor among more conservative African Americans, and so he began crafting speeches to foster a sense of common cause among them. Douglass's pre–Reconstruction era speeches were aimed at galvanizing white Americans to make slaves free and to make freedmen citizens; the later speeches expose fissures in the African American community and Douglass's struggle to redefine his leadership after the war, especially in the wake of the post-Reconstruction setbacks.

In selecting the twenty speeches reprinted here, the editors balanced a concern for significance and range. They reproduced what have been regarded as Douglass's most famous pieces, including "What to the Slave Is the Fourth of July?" and "The Freedmen's Monument to Abraham Lincoln," as well as others that have garnered little attention but offer fresh insights into Douglass's methods of persuasion and modes of fostering community. Speeches that attempted to build civic cohesion among African Americans and reformers include "I Have Come to Tell You Something about Slavery" (1841), his oldest preserved speech, which uses embodied rhetoric to move his audience, and "Which Greeley Are We Voting For?" (1872), which shows Douglass's supple use of pronouns and parody to build a constituency. Speeches included here show Douglass's concern for the women's movement, temperance, lynching, education, and science, in addition to slavery and civil rights. They depict him in moments when he was highly marginalized and struggling

to find a constituency ("The American Constitution and the Slave," 1860), and when he was central to African American communities and the Republican party ("Our Composite Nationality," 1869).

Most importantly, the speeches in this volume illuminate the different methods that Douglass used as a reformer and as a performer. In "'It Moves,' or the Philosophy of Reform" (1883), Douglass outlines a distinctively humanistic theory of social change coming not from the "angel" or "devil" on a person's shoulder, not from faith in metaphysical deliverance, but from truthfully observing and analyzing social phenomena, no matter the costs. The reformer, he argues, "has to part with old friends; break away from the beaten paths of society, and advance against the vehement protests of the most sacred sentiments of the human heart." While Douglass endured such losses—a slave mistress of whom he had been fond, his mentor Garrison, friends who felt jealous of his successes later in life—he nonetheless found great compensations, as well. Few reformers in history have had the resilience to spend fifty-plus years agitating for change, but Douglass gathered many allies, especially among women's rights activists, in the later years of his life.

As the most famous African American leader of the nineteenth century and the template for many future African American leaders, Douglass influenced both the black oratorical tradition and dominant-culture oratory. He found a balance between a plainspoken style and the ornate traditions celebrated in *The Columbian Orator,* and the result was enormously appealing to audiences. His distinctive use of humor and irony later found a modern form in the speeches of Malcolm X and even the political comedy of Richard Pryor. Douglass was critical of minstrelsy, but not of humor per se, and that may have been one of his most powerful legacies. While battling some of the most horrendous social evils of his era, he continued to appreciate the humorous side of life and shared this in some of his most successful orations.

On 20 February 1895, Douglass attended the Triennial Session of the Women's Council in Washington, D.C. He was an honored

guest, escorted to the platform by Susan B. Anthony and Anna Shaw. He moved down the aisle, according to May Wright Sewall, "with the majesty of a king" and "with every eye fixed upon him."[25] He sat next to Anthony, one of his oldest friends, and though he had intended to return home early, he was so engrossed in the day's discussion that he stayed for the entire day. Returning to his home late that afternoon, he and his wife, Helen, had a hasty dinner so that he could get to the nearby Hillsdale African Church to deliver a lecture. While awaiting the carriage, Douglass entertained Helen with a lively account of the day, impersonating one of the speakers. He fell to his knees, hands clasped, a gesture that Helen thought part of the humorous performance, when he crumpled to the floor. Commemorating him at his funeral five days later, May Sewall remarked on her impression of him at the afternoon session, "I thought, there walks a page of history, an epic poem, a tragedy."[26] Douglass died, fittingly, at this intersection between epic and humor, and between his twin commitments to gender and racial justice.

25. *In Memoriam: Frederick Douglass,* 46.
26. Ibid., 17; "Death of Frederick Douglass," New York *Times,* 20 February 1895.

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