

A Ruthless Critique of Everything Existing: Frederick Douglass and the Architectonic of African American Radicalism

Omedi Ochieng

This study argues that Frederick Douglass articulated a distinctively radical rhetorical stance that searched for a passage through the epistemological antinomies of transcendence and immanence; the ideological antinomies of structure and agency; and the performative antinomies of the actually existing and the utopian. He did so by offering a radical critique of the dominant rhetorical traditions of his time—that of Puritan rhetoric, Lockean liberalism, and herrenvolk Republicanism. Specifically, Douglass challenged the metaphysical presuppositions of Puritanism, demonstrated the contradictions of Lockean liberalism’s social contract, and offered a trenchant critique of herrenvolk Republicanism’s mobocracy.

Keywords: African American Rhetoric; Epistemology; Frederick Douglass; Ideology; Performance; Radicalism

“To be radical is to go to the root of the matter. For man, however, the root is man himself.” (Marx, Critique of Hegel’s Philosophy of Right)

African American rhetors in 19th-century America confronted a series of stark questions that turned on the definition and meaning of radicalism. The first of these

Omedi Ochieng (PhD, Bowling Green State University) is Assistant Professor of Communication Studies at Westmont College. The author gratefully acknowledges the wise editorial leadership of Brian L. Ott and thanks the anonymous reviewers for their insightful comments. He would also like to thank Ania Las, Mark McPhail, and Joshua McFawn, who offered invaluable assistance and encouragement throughout the writing of this essay. Correspondence to: Omedi Ochieng, Westmont College, Communication Studies, 955 La Paz Road, Santa Barbara, CA 93108, USA. E-mail: ochieng@westmont.edu

questions was epistemological: the definition and intelligibility of radicalism in a system that, in its claim to being postrevolutionary, had thoroughly appropriated for itself much of the iconology and signs of radicalism. The question of how to define radicalism was bitterly fought largely because it determined the nature of the change wanted, how sweeping it was going to be, and the moral legitimacy of its advocates. Commentators have noted, for example, that etymologically, radicalism meant "related to the root." What is not clear, however, is what the roots of a society are. For example, James Darsey (1997) in making a case for a prophetic rhetorical tradition in the United States defines a radical rhetoric as that which offers a return to the society's "origins." And yet, for many African American abolitionists, all too aware that the so-called Founding Fathers were slaveholders and the sacralized Constitution had rendered them two-fifths of persons, a call for a return to origins must have seemed to them not so much radical as reactionary.

Closely related to the epistemological questions raised by the meaning of radicalism was the issue of what intellectual resources, if any, were at hand in resisting the system. Would rhetors be able to draw from the intellectual traditions within the United States or had they to look outside to the exciting and yet fledgling traditions of insurrection and class revolts in places such as Haiti and across the Atlantic? In the event that they drew from the prevailing intellectual traditions in the United States, would that make the antislavery rhetors complicit with slavery given that slavery itself was underpinned in crucial respects by the dominant intellectual traditions of the time?

The second question concerning the meaning of radicalism turned on matters of agency. African American experiences testified to a profoundly evil sociopolitical system and yet this very system produced some of the most heartfelt, strenuous, and widespread paeans to the values of freedom, equality, and democracy. The question of radicalism thus posed was a vexed critique of the origins, articulations, and scope of resistance to slavery, and later on, the Reconstruction terror of lynching: Did it involve a root and branch overthrow of the system or did it admit of reform? Moreover, radicalism appeared to counsel doing all that was necessary to be effective, even if that meant actively disavowing any solidarity with other radicals. Thus, for example, antislavery advocates had to decide whether to dissociate themselves from leaders and movements such as John Brown so as to appear more moderate and therefore better positioned for some kind of compromise. But, in the reactionary cauldron that was antebellum America, all abolitionist movements were regarded as radical by the forces of the status quo. It was not clear that compromising their message would make it more effective.

The third question regarding the meaning of radicalism was ethical. A genuine radicalism seemed to demand a violent overthrow of the system given that any other opposition to it—such as pacifism—would not only be ineffective, but precisely for that reason would appear to be complicit with the institution of slavery's continuation and expansion. But then, if radicalism did mean something, then it denoted a root and branch rejection of the system, which crucially depended on and thrived on violence. The ethics of radicalism also inevitably posed the question of truth. If

truthfulness meant anything, it surely demanded that the system and those responsible for its perpetuation be confronted with the gory details of their perfidy. But against this stance was an equally compelling ethic that ruled out any characterization of opponents in terms that demonized or cast them as irredeemably evil.

This study argues that Frederick Douglass articulated a distinctively radical rhetorical stance that searched for a passage through the epistemological antinomies of transcendence and immanence, the ideological antinomies of structure and agency, and the performative antinomies of the actually existing and the utopian. He did so by offering a radical critique of the dominant rhetorical traditions of his time—that of Puritan rhetoric, Lockean liberalism, and *herrenvolk* Republicanism. Specifically, Douglass challenged the metaphysical presuppositions of Puritanism, demonstrated the contradictions of Lockean liberalism's social contract, and offered a trenchant critique of *herrenvolk* Republicanism's mobocracy. Douglass's radicalism did not stop with a negative critique. He endeavored to craft an alternative radical vision of the United States that outlined an epistemology of critique, advocated an ideology of equality, and defined style as performative.

Douglass was well placed to engage in this task of articulation. As John Louis Lucaites (1997) has observed, "Frederick Douglass was without a doubt one of the most important spokespersons for the burgeoning African-American identity in the antebellum period, his reputation as a powerful orator ranking him with the likes of Wendell Phillips and Daniel Webster among whites and H. H. Garnet among blacks" (p. 49). And yet, Lucaites continued, "Given this reputation, it is striking that our bibliographies of nineteenth-century public discourse generally fail to account for the rhetorical significance or complexities of his leadership and public speaking in anything but passing fashion" (p. 49). In the years since Lucaites' charge, rhetorical scholars have begun to pay greater attention to Douglass. Nevertheless, most of these useful and insightful studies have been focused on Douglass's 1852 "The Meaning of the Fourth of July to the Negro" address, whereas I take a synoptic view of Douglass's oratory, writings, and biographies in articulating his rhetorical theory.

Dominant Rhetorical Traditions in 19th-Century America

Frederick Douglass did not articulate his rhetoric of radicalism in a vacuum. There were arguably three rhetorical traditions that dominated the American sociopolitical landscape of his time. The first was the Puritan tradition, the most powerful sect among the New World Calvinists. The Puritans were so-called because they aimed to "purify" the church of what they deemed to be its falsehoods and corruption. The second was Lockean liberalism, which proclaimed individual liberty as the irreducible foundation of politics. The third was *herrenvolk* Republicanism, under whose banner a disparate group of people rallied to the promotion of the public good, virtue, and White male nationalism. Suffice it to say that these rhetorical traditions, while distinct and often antagonistic, also overlapped and coalesced depending on the particular political enemy they confronted.

Douglass articulated a radical rhetoric by employing a dazzling array of tools in confronting these dominant rhetorical traditions: He shattered their epistemology from within by an “inside out” questioning of their presuppositions; critiqued their ideology by standing these rhetorical traditions on their heads; and demonstrated the limits of their style through his art of performance. It is to these articulations that I shall now turn.

Frederick Douglass and the Radical Epistemology of Critique

The epistemological questions raised by radicalism primarily involved two questions. First, how was one to gain an intellectual foothold in advancing a critique of American intellectual traditions that had proven so impervious to any outside critique that did not share in their assumptions, not least because of their claim to a prerevolutionary or postrevolutionary mantle? Second, from where could the Black radical look to find the intellectual resources that would prove useful and sustaining in a climate thoroughly oriented toward the misrecognition and erasure of African American intellect?

Douglass’s epistemological stance strove to gain this foothold through an immanent “inside out” critique of dominant epistemologies. Douglass’s “immanent” argumentation meant that he engaged dominant epistemologies through a ruthless internal criticism—what Douglass (1999) called a “dissection” (p. 21). The upshot of this stance sought not so much to resolve as dissolve the questions posed by these dominating traditions. Douglass’s epistemology was motivated by strategic as well as normative reasons. The strategic motives sprung from his recognition of the architectonic of dominant epistemologies. Puritanism posited an epistemology of revelation (Bercovitch, 1978). Puritan proponents of slavery and of Black inferiority posited their claims as an absolute truth revealed by none other than God. Puritanism’s trump card against all challenges was to invoke its claim of incommensurability to rival “worldly” epistemologies and to leverage this as a weapon of a priori exclusion against external challengers and as a weapon of excommunication for dissenters within its ranks.

Liberalism’s experiential—that is to say, empirical—epistemology, for all its self-congratulatory enlightenment rhetoric of superiority to Puritan orthodoxy, was just as exclusionary. What counted as experience to liberal proponents of slavery and Black inferiority was White, male, and propertied experience. The empirical testimony of Blacks was either excluded from hearing and thus not heard at all or was only acceptable as the “raw material” from which Whites could fashion a “mature” or “developed” philosophy.

Herrenvolk Republicanism, on the other hand, claimed as its source of justification the common sense of the community. Such “common sense” claimed its source to be the “intuition” or “native wisdom” of the “people,” considered—“obviously” if rather unreflectively—as White American men. The criteria for determining the truth of this common sense are what Jay Fliegelman (1993) has described as “private rather than public virtues: prudence, temperance, self-control, honesty,

and most problematically, sincerity” (p. 21). Such private virtues were considered inaccessible to the slave and, often, were invoked as the very reason for the enslavement of Blacks.

It is these dominant traditions that Douglass confronted. He did so by interrogating them from the inside; that is, by proceeding from their own terms and, by doing so, he undertook to shatter their very premises. Douglass pursued a two-pronged strategy: First, he displayed the contradictions that bedeviled the epistemological assumptions of the dominant traditions. Second, he demonstrated the limits of the epistemologies espoused by the dominant traditions.

Douglass (1999) was relentless in critiquing the epistemological contradictions of the dominant traditions. The purpose of this was to have the dominant traditions fail on their own terms, to make their claims collapse from the weight of their own internal incoherencies. He shredded Puritanism’s prized totalizing worldview in his remarkably iconoclastic “The Church and Prejudice” address, where he engineers a collision between its pious metaphysics with the brute facts of its social ontology:

At New Bedford, where I live, there was a great revival of religion not long ago—many were converted and “received” as they said, “into the kingdom of heaven.” But it seems, the kingdom of heaven is like a net; at least so it was according to the practice of these pious Christians; and when the net was drawn ashore, they had to set down and cull out the fish. Well, it happened now that some of the fish had rather black scales; so these were sorted out and packed by themselves . . . [A] young lady fell into a trance. When she awoke, she declared she had been to heaven. Her friends were all anxious to know what and whom she had seen there; so she told the whole story. But there was one good old lady whose curiosity went beyond that of all the others—and she inquired of the girl that had the vision, if she saw any black folks in heaven? After some hesitation, the reply was, “Oh! I didn’t go into the kitchen!” (Douglass, 1999, p. 4)

Douglass was just as unsparing with liberalism, attacking its supposed commitment to empirical evidence by citing evidence that would trouble its claim to empiricism. Aware of liberalism’s insistence on direct, unmediated experiences and observations, he challenges it to deny his charges against slaveholders and slavery by arguing that his accusations stem from “what I have seen with my own eyes, felt on my own person, and know to have occurred in my own neighborhood” (1999, pp. 11–12). Douglass even confronts directly the liberal dismissal of Black testimony, all the better to challenge its justification in his withering critique of A. C. C. Thompson, then a prominent apologist for slavery. Stated Douglass: “It is a notorious fact, even on this side of the Atlantic, that a black man cannot testify against a white in any court in Maryland, or any other slave state” (p. 24). Perhaps the two characteristics of Douglass’s citation of empirical evidence to counter liberal arguments are the sheer quantity and the range of sources he taps into. Aware of the Lockean dictum that one criterion for weighing the reliability of secondhand testimony is the number of people that claim to have borne witness to a certain incident, Douglass repeatedly cited Theodore D. Weld’s *Slavery As It Is: The Testimony of a Thousand Witnesses*, an account of the conditions of slaves in the South as compiled

from the testimony of fugitive slaves in the North and from Southern newspapers (p. 33). It is telling that Weld's account also carried accounts from Southern newspapers for Douglass never lost an opportunity to have slaveholders' own words and deeds tell against their own intentions and interests.

Similarly, aware of the deep premium that Republican ideology placed on laws and on sincerity, Douglass relentlessly cited the laws of the land to prove that much of what the slaveholders said about the existence of humane laws in the United States was not only contradicted by the actually existing cruel and unusual laws, but was also said with intent to deceive those who had no knowledge that such laws existed. He offered a blistering attack on American laws and Republican duplicity in his "Farewell Speech to the British People" address:

There is not a single inaugural speech, not an annual message, but teems with lies like this—that 'in this land every man enjoys the protection of the law, the protection of his property, the protection of his person, the protection of his liberty.' They iterate and reiterate these statements over and over again. Thus, these Americans, as I said before, are skilled in the art of falsehood. (Douglass, 1999, p. 65)

In other words, Douglass was charging the Republicans with lying, perhaps one of the most incendiary charges that one could level at the Republicans, given their loud proclamations of sincerity and authenticity as cardinal virtues. In the same vein, Douglass in the 1851 "The Free Negro's Place is in America" speech invokes a *reductio* to draw attention to the "American absurdity" of Republican law, all the better to demonstrate its jangling contradictions: "The enactments of this government do not recognize him [the slave] as a citizen, but as a thing. In the light of the law, a slave can no more commit treason than a horse or an ox can commit treason. A horse kicks out the brains of his master. Do you try the horse for treason? Then why the slave who does the same thing?" (Douglass, 1999, p. 182).

Arguably, the most significant aspect of Douglass's radicalism lay in his rethinking of the notion of limits. Epistemologically, the power of the dominant rhetorical traditions lay in the unthought; it was Douglass's insight to see that this epistemological unthought was partly bounded by the unthinkable. Such was the case particularly with Puritanism, which drew its fearsome rhetorical power from its enthymematic invocation of God as warrant. Douglass countered this enthymeme through another type of enthymeme—the elenctic rhetorical question (Conley, 1984). In his first narrative, for example, Douglass (1982) challenges the notion of slavery as ordained by God through an elenctic rhetorical question: "Let me be free! Is there any God? Why am I a slave?" (p. 106). In another passage, Douglass (1982) concedes the existence of God, but asks: "Does a righteous God govern the universe?" (p. 121). The power of Douglass's rhetorical question goes far beyond the shock value of questioning the existence of God or casting doubt on God's goodness in a Puritanical culture. It also questioned the absolutistic claims of Puritanism. Douglass was opening the space for alternative renditions of what had befallen the slave, primarily its rootedness in human agency.

Douglass's sweeping critiques of the ideologies at the heart of the American rhetorical tradition was not nevertheless lacking in difficulties of its own. From where

could the radical draw on the intellectual resources to challenge, sustain, and offer alternatives to the status quo? For this, Douglass turned to analogy and imagination. As the abolitionist fervor gained in intensity through the United States, nothing was guaranteed to draw as much inspiration as well as opprobrium as the wave of Black emancipation that had been inaugurated by the revolution in Haiti. Douglass (1999) hailed “the wisdom and heroism of Toussaint” (p. 583), famed leader of the Haiti insurrection. At a time when American exceptionalism was unquestioned, he was scathing:

I cannot agree with my friend Mr. Garrison, in relation to my love and attachment to this land. I have no love for America, as such; I have no patriotism. I have no country. What country have I? The institutions of this country do not know me, do not recognize me as a man. I am not thought of, spoken of, except as a piece of property belonging to some Christian slaveholder, and all the religious and political institutions of this country, alike pronounce me a slave and a chattel. Now, in such a country as this, I cannot have patriotism. (Douglass, 1999, p. 77)

The genealogy of Douglass’s epistemological radicalism is not easily established. Nevertheless, there exist certain pointers. At the heart of this epistemology was the African rhetorical tradition. Scholars such as Sterling Stuckey (1990) have uncovered stunning connections of the influences and articulations that existed between African and African American thought and practice. While there is still much work to be done in articulating the specific articulations within rhetoric, recent historical work is uncovering intriguing connections of African epistemes and practices in the Americas. Gwendolyn Midlo Hall (2005), for example, has challenged “the still widely held belief among scholars as well as the general public that Africans were so fragmented when they arrived in the Western Hemisphere that specific African regions and ethnicities had little influence on particular regions in the Americas Specific groups of Africans made major contributions to the formation of the new cultures developing throughout the Americas. This process is called creolization” (p. xv). Douglass (1967) imbibed these rhetorical traditions from his grandmother, Betsey Bailey, and from other slaves who, so he reports, “remembered being brought from Africa” (p. 50). Moreover, he was also deeply influenced by slave narratives such as that of Olaudah Equiano (Baker, 1984). Of these African rhetorical traditions, one of the most important was a deep understanding of context—and, consequently, a suspicion of blithe universalization. The Igbo, among whom Olaudah Equiano hailed from, had a deeply contextual worldview (Nzegwu, 2006).

Frederick Douglass and the Radical Ideology of Agency

The question of how to define radicalism was bitterly fought largely because it determined the nature of the change wanted, how sweeping it was going to be, and the moral legitimacy of its advocates. The lines had long been sharply drawn. To William Garrison and many radical abolitionists, the United States was corrupt tout court and any prospect of change required a complete repudiation of its slave-legitimizing Constitution. In his early activism as a Garrisonian abolitionist,

Douglass had hewn to the Garrisonian line that the destruction of slavery must take a moral and not political aspect. Consequently, Douglass was against participation in electoral contests through voting and supporting any political party. He was a vigorous proponent of the Garrisonian view of the Constitution “as a most foul and bloody conspiracy against the rights of three millions of enslaved and imbruted men” (Douglass, 1999, p. 140).

But in the 1850s, Douglass went through a transformation. His change of mind was as much a rupture as it was a long gestating idea, as much ideological as it was kairoitic. The proslavery backlash of the 1850s had ushered in the draconian Fugitive Slave Law. For Douglass, that marked nothing less than the conquest of slave power over the entire nation. Under such circumstance, Douglass (2003) reasoned, “To abstain from voting, was to refuse to exercise a legitimate and powerful means for abolishing slavery” (p. 292).

The roots of Douglass’s redefinition of radicalism lay, first, in his rearticulation of the meaning of agency. Douglass argued that the ground of agency must ultimately be considered as the field of human—not supernatural or ahistorical—activity. Toward that end, he offered devastating critiques of the causal theories proffered by the dominant ideologies as to the reasons for slavery and prejudice against Blacks. Against the moralism that slavery and racial prejudice ought to be attributed to “spiritual fallenness” or the mysterious designs of God, Douglass (1999) was categorical: “And whence comes it [prejudice]? The grand cause is slavery; but there are others less prominent; one of them is the way in which children in this part of the country are instructed to regard the blacks” (pp. 3–4). He pitilessly mocked the Puritan theory of Intelligent Design, which attributed the origin of slavery to God’s providential creation of Blacks as slaves and Whites as masters. Said Douglass (1999), in a withering imitation of White Southern preachers: “How beautiful are the arrangements of Providence!... Look at your hard, horny hands—see how nicely they are adapted to the labor you have to perform! Oh! The wisdom of God!” (p. 4).

For Douglass, no institution bespoke such corruption as the Christian church. Douglass (1982) had moments when he believed that it was Christian ideology itself that was the problem: “For of all slaveholders with whom I have ever met, religious slaveholders are the worst” (p. 117). But he was too much of a contextualist to believe that the church was essentially and transhistorically evil and too much of an internationalist to believe that it was everywhere as venal and racist as the then American church. In his 1847 “Farewell Speech to the British People” address, for example, he states: “Slavery was opposed by the Church in the West Indies; not so in America; there, religion and slavery are linked and interlinked with each other—woven and interwoven together” (Douglass, 1999, p. 62). Nevertheless, whatever his beliefs about the global truth or falsity of Christianity, his belief in what he called a “practical religion” placed him at odds with much of the Christian faithful. He repudiated Christianity’s supernaturalist accounts of cause and agency in favor of a thoroughly naturalist, worldly philosophy. Early on in his speeches, he told his audience that “he had offered many prayers for freedom, but he did not get it until he prayed with his legs” (Gibson, 1990, p. 95).

For Douglass, therefore, in an exquisite reversal of the meaning and terms of radicalism, the Garrisonian orthodoxy that political action must be based on moral and only moral suasion, was indistinguishable from political quietism. As he would later say, making a distinction between his own abolitionist telos and the moralism of the Garrisonians: "The man who has thoroughly embraced the principles of justice, love, and liberty, like the true preacher of Christianity, is less anxious to reproach the world of its sins, than to win it to repentance" (Douglass, 1999, p. 327). This stance of purity had led a powerful section of the Garrisonians to advocate that the slave states be allowed to secede if that is what it took to keep the North pure. Douglass (1999) would reject this view, arguing that this meant that "the freedom of the whole slave population would be sacrificed . . . on a bare theory, and for a theory, which if consistently adhered to would drive a man out of the world" (p. 325).

Douglass was just as critical of the liberal attribution of Black inferiority to a "law of nature." For Douglass (1999), such claims were ahistorical, not only because of the relatively recent emergence of racism in history, but also because of the achievements of Blacks in many historical epochs. He makes a powerful case for the articulation of "nature" and "human agency" when he says: "A man is worked upon by what he works on. He may carve out his circumstances but his circumstances will carve him out as well" (Douglass, 1999, p. 294).

It is in the same terms that Douglass challenges the Republican claim that Blacks deserved to be slaves because they lacked agency and virtue. For Douglass (1999), such a charge was as bemusing as it was ironic and his response is a biting illustration of his strategy of reversing the terms of debate: "By the way, I think I may claim a superior industry for the colored man over the white man, on the showing of the white men themselves . . ." (p. 108).

But precisely because responsibility for slavery lay not in the spiritual sphere, in forces of nature, or in the sheer force of individual will, Douglass came to reject the combined Puritan, Liberal, and Republican ideologies that would have slavery be seen in individualist and moralist terms. His theory of slaveholding ideology reflected this change in his conception of what radicalism demanded. Initially, his language indicted slaveholders and their supporters for hypocrisy. Those Whites who were justifying slavery were not ignorant of the fact that they were perpetrating or were complicit in the perpetuation of an evil, but were engaging in it because of their greed, or fear of Black vengeance, or as a sheer exercise in the will to power and domination (1999, p. 196). Nonetheless, Douglass came to realize that the problem was far graver than hypocrisy or an inconsistency between ideals and practice. He came to hold that those very ideals, even as they enabled the flowering of freedom among Whites, were often instruments wielded against Blacks. In a striking passage given in his speech to the American and Foreign Anti-Slavery Society, he declared thus: "The glorious doctrines of your revolutionary fathers, and the more glorious teachings of the Sons of God, are construed and applied against us" (Douglass, 1999, p. 251). Slavery, Douglass increasingly came to hold, was totalitarian in its reach—not only physically, in the gulag archipelago of the plantation but also psychologically stunting and imaginatively corrupting (Sundquist, 1993, p. 111). In

other words, for a slave system to work, it required not only that a vast amount of blood and treasure be expended in subjugating the slave population, but the active and passive complicity and collaboration of the institutions in the country. Hence the congressional statute, exposed and mocked by Douglass, that slavery not only be upheld as legal, but that antislavery discussion be banned from the floor of Congress. It is in this vein that Douglass (1999) speaks of the United States: "The fact is, the whole system, the entire network of American society, is one great falsehood, from beginning to end." (p. 56)

The upshot, for Douglass, translated into two imperatives: first, slavery must be tackled institutionally and structurally rather than individualistically and moralistically; and second, that slavery ought to be fought not only through moral suasion and shaming, but also by mustering all the weapons that the abolitionist could muster. Douglass took the first imperative to mean that abolitionists must reclaim the institutions that they had ceded to slaveholders. Douglass therefore rejected the essentialist Garrisonian conception of the Constitution as having a singular meaning and as owned by one side, the slaveholders, in favor of a conception of the Constitution as essentially contested. Douglass's newfound stance would be the final straw that would break the alliance with the Garrisonian abolitionists. The stakes were high, not least because he was redefining the terms of radicalism.

Nothing underscored his break with the Garrisonians more than the evolution of his views regarding the Constitution. His change of mind appeared to involve a number of considerations. First, under the influence of his friend Gerrit Smith, he rejected the original intent theory that held that the Constitution ought to be interpreted according to the intentions of the framers. It therefore followed that whether the framers themselves intended the Constitution to be proslavery, or whether they were slaveholders themselves, was strictly irrelevant as to what the Constitution meant (Douglass, 1999). Second, Douglass adopted the argument, again from Smith, that the preamble of the Constitution ought to govern how it should be interpreted. This preamble, which read that the national government had been formed to establish a more perfect union, promote the general welfare, and secure the blessings of liberty, was taken by Douglass as the lens through which all the parts and details of the Constitution ought to be interpreted. Third, Douglass took the view that because slavery was not explicitly mentioned and unambiguously sanctioned in the Constitution; notions about its constitutionality were imputations to the document, not within the document itself.

The second imperative meant that Douglass's reclamation of political action and of the Constitution was likely to have been influenced as much by principled conviction on the merits of the argument as by a steely political calculation of the most expedient course to take in order to advance the abolitionist cause. His argument that the intentions of the framers ought not to govern the interpretation of the Constitution was consistent with his performative epistemology that rejected the notion that intentions were overriding, let alone knowable. Nonetheless, it is also clear that Douglass's (1999) new stance on the Constitution did involve a fair amount of political expedience. Prior to his change of opinion, he had confessed to his friend and interlocutor Gerrit Smith of his weariness in having to defend the view that the

Constitution was proslavery. But the fact that Douglass may have come to an honest belief that the Constitution did not sanction slavery, did not mean that he was completely settled on the matter. Indeed, it is telling how tepid and even unconvinced his defense of the Constitution was compared with his earlier ferocious, gimlet-eyed close reading of its proslavery clauses. In an earlier debate with Smith, prior to his change of opinion, Douglass (1999) detailed the many articles in the Constitution that effectively made it, if not a full-throated support of slavery, then at least its facilitator (pp. 129–133). A changed Douglass did not attempt to gloss over these details; rather he argued that he had “arrived at the firm conviction that the Constitution, construed in the light of well-established rules of legal interpretation, might be made consistent in its details with the noble purposes in its preamble” (1999, p. 173). In his confrontation with the Garrisonians when he first publicly announced his change of opinion, he did not speak so much in defense of the Constitution as he spoke of how the Constitution could be used; that is, employing the idiom of pragmatism rather than Kantianism: The Constitution, he argued, could “be wielded in behalf of emancipation” (p. 173).

Douglass’s reclamation of institutions was deeply articulated with a revaluation of values. It is here that he arguably offers signs of a positive ideological vision, but even so he always articulated his ideological stance in a critical dialogue with the dominant traditional ideologies. Perhaps his most salient argument was for equality. The vision of equality that he outlined was expansive, articulated as a praxis of participation, and marked by solidarity. He was vigorous in his advocacy of equality not only of Blacks with Whites, but also of women with men. It is striking that Douglass (1999) was the only man to play a prominent role in the proceedings of the Seneca Falls Convention for women’s rights. At this convention, he offered a powerful argument for women’s right to the elective franchise, a proposition that was then considered even by feminists such as Lucretia Mott to be too radical.

Such an expansive vision of equality was inextricably wedded to an articulation of equality as participatory praxis, not formalistic. This conception of equality cut deeply against dominant traditions. Against Puritanism’s unabashed cult of hierarchy, Douglass offered a radical alternative. Against the exclusivist, formalist, social contractarianism of liberalism, he offered not only an expansive equality that included Blacks and women, but a praxis of participating, embodied selves (1999, p. 133). Against the paternalism of William Garrison and his followers, he crafted a vision of a participatory self-determination (p. 325). But he also dismissed as empty idealism the sentiment, Republican in inspiration, that the slave should be left alone to “right himself.” Douglass’s view, captured well in his energetic advocacy that Blacks be recruited to the ranks of the Union forces to fight in the Civil War, was for a participatory, collective self-determination. This conception of equality was radical insofar as it demanded redistribution as an irreducible aspect of justice (1999, p. 325).

Frederick Douglass and the Radical Style of Performance

Frederick Douglass’s style aimed at articulating a passage through a number of anti-monies. It was important, to begin with, to dramatize the strangulating power of

slavery. But it was just as important to show that it could be overcome, that a better future could be envisioned. Moreover, Douglass's abolitionist message had to gain a hearing in a virulently proslavery context. Yet it was imperative that his message be sufficiently alienating and estranging to shock his audience from the torpor of its moral complaisance. Lastly, Douglass had to appeal to his audience for help and solidarity in the fight against slavery. Yet this appeal had to be articulated by demonstrating his autonomy and the fact that he was free by moral right and not by the benevolence of his White audience.

Douglass endeavored to meet these goals by crafting a style that emphasized performance and the embodiment of form. In doing so, he offered a challenging critique of the three dominant rhetorical styles: that of Puritanism's jeremiad; the Republican and liberal epideictic; and the Republican populist spectacle. David Van Leer (1990) has drawn attention to the manner in which Douglass put to use and then subverted the narrative form of the Puritan conversion narrative. Douglass's narrative tracks the Puritan conversion narrative in laying out a reversal of fortune—in the case of the Puritan narrative, the conversion from "sinner" to "saved," and, in Douglass's narrative, a movement from "enslaved" to "free." Nonetheless, whereas the reversal in the Puritan narrative "measures the human inability to anticipate God's actions," Douglass's reversal, "rather than establishing an absolute standard of divine knowledge, suggests the relativism of power and the ways in which the canny slave can exploit it" (p. 121). The upshot, Van Leer argues, is that by "inverting the traditional meanings of these conversions, Douglass implicitly denies the divine origin of his conversion, turning it from 'God's plot' into just one among many ways of structuring a narrative" (p. 121).

Douglass also offered a critique of the Republican epideictic. Andrea Deacon (2003) is correct in arguing that the "reduction of Douglass's rhetoric to an epideictic or ceremonial function is limiting and no doubt has contributed to the lack of scholarship and critical inquiry surrounding his oratory" (pp. 65–83). Douglass viewed the Republican epideictic as exclusionary insofar as its commemorative ceremonies to praise the nation and its heroes did not feature Black participation. In an epideictic speech given to commemorate emancipation in the West Indies, he offered a strikingly different articulation of the epideictic in calling forth its inclusive potentialities: "We have met to commemorate no deed of sectional strife," Douglass (1999) said, and his speech would continue with this theme of inclusion: "We have this day a free platform . . . all are invited. Let no man feel . . . a mere spectator" (p. 104).

As Edwin Black (1978) has pointed out, 19th-century American epideictic was awash in the sentimental style—a mode of speech that he argues was notable not so much for "its stately movement or of its piling on of adjectives or its tendency to tear passions to tatters" (p. 73) but rather for its didactic function of instructing the auditor on how to feel. According to Black, the reason for the sentimental style's popularity lay in its evasiveness, and, in particular, in its ability to induce the audience into repressing the bad conscience of slavery. Black takes Daniel Webster's "Bunker Hill Address" as paradigmatic of this genre, which "not only elicits affective experiences, but also defines and delimits them. It enables the emotions to be given

recreation under sanctioned auspices” (p. 73). Against this evasive function of the epideictic, Douglass (1999) offered a mordant style of truth-telling: “If there is no struggle there is no progress. Those who profess to favor freedom and yet deprecate agitation, are men who want crops without plowing up the ground, they want rain without thunder and lightning.” (p. 367)

Douglass’s style would let loose a chorus of complaints that he was “uncivil” and “extremist.” An outraged Reverend Samuel Hanson Cox of Brooklyn, New York, called him an “abolition agitator and ultraist,” to which Douglass (1999) replied: “Sir, I regard this as a compliment, though you intend it as a condemnation” (p. 43). That Douglass offered a strikingly different tone and structure in his epideictic addresses is not in question. James Jasinski (1997) has argued that Douglass belongs in the subversive epideictic tradition. Andrea Deacon (2003), for her part, argues that Douglass’s oratory should be placed outside the category of the epideictic, given its powerful deliberative and forensic aspects. It is possible to go even further, however. Douglass may be said to rearticulate the very form of the epideictic with a long-forgotten sentiment. As J. Richard Chase (1961) has noted, the epideictic was, before Aristotle, conceived of not simply as a ceremonial speech, but as a speech articulated by a noncitizen, an outsider in ancient Greece. As such, it had an epistemological and political edge that Aristotle neutralized. Douglass rearticulated the liminal perspective offered by the epideictic.

Douglass was well aware that the very aesthetic of the epideictic was oriented toward spectacle—and therefore spectatorship. As Poulakos and Poulakos (1999) have argued: “Epideictic rhetoric was also influenced by the culture’s fondness of, and delight in, exhibition” (p. 27). Douglass used and challenged this politics of spectacle in a variety of ways. As Robert Fanuzzi (1999) has shown, Douglass “found himself judged according to a set of conventions that valued his body as a visual delight” (p. 27). Whites rhapsodized about his “tall and manly form,” his “singular grace and vitality,” his “erect carriage,” and his “majestic” physique. Ebenezer Bassett, betraying the sexual leer of the “racial gaze,” gushed that Douglass’s “physical equipment . . . left little to be desired” (Fanuzzi, 1999, p. 27). Douglass used his body not only to gain entry into the closed circle of the epideictic, but also to challenge it. By demonstrating that he could pass as White, he also undercut notions of racial authenticity by demonstrating the potentiality for human self-making. As Fanuzzi astutely demonstrates, such self-making for Douglass went beyond the national to embrace the transnational (p. 43). Unfortunately, Fanuzzi assumes too quickly that Douglass’s ideology of the body emerges from an articulation of Republican conceptions of representation. He does not engage with the constructions of the body in the African tradition, such as the suggestive Igbo ideology of *ikenga*, which articulated the aesthetic and the political in exhorting upward social mobility through embodied self-fashioning (Bentor, 1988, pp. 66–69). In this light, Douglass’s mimicry—including his mockery of Southern preachers by imitating their accent and mannerisms—not only offered a radical critique of the cult of authenticity, but also served as a palimpsest to an alternative praxis.

For Douglass, the epideictic's politics of spectacle was structurally articulated to other rhetorical forms that legitimized the Republic of slavery. Slavery was not simply a mode of production—it constituted a structure of feeling and being that was lived and breathed in “entertainments” and rituals such as the minstrel show and the lynch mob (Williamson, 1986, p. 124). Douglass well knew that the Black person at the epideictic podium activated the slaveholding unconscious of the lynch mob and the slave market. Eric J. Sundquist (1993) notes, strikingly, that for Douglass the lecture platform “was too much like the auction block” (p. 104). It was partly for this reason that he also undertook other forms of communication such as his newspaper work and the open letter.

The upshot of Douglass's performance was utopian. In many senses, Douglass's performance was a seizure of time and space from the iron grip in which it was held by the dominant rhetorical traditions. Sacvan Bercovitch's (1978) description of the European jeremiad as a “massive ritual reinforcement of tradition” (p. 23) may apply even better to the Republican epideictic. In contrast, the American jeremiad “discarded the Old World ideal of stasis for a New World vision of the future. Its function was to create a climate of anxiety that helped release the restless ‘progressivist’ energies required for the success of the venture” (p. 23).

Thus, there was a distinctive difference between the Republican epideictic and the American jeremiad. Where the former looked mostly to the past, the latter mostly looked to the future. Where the Republican epideictic smothered its audience in a haze of normality, insisting that the status quo was secure, the American jeremiad desperately preached apocalypse and imminent doom. Perhaps it is for this reason that in the mid-19th century, the epideictic was the rhetoric of choice for the liberal federalists while the insurgencies of *herrenvolk* Republicanism and abolitionists claimed the jeremiad.

And yet Douglass noticed the affinities as well as the differences between the two genres. This is not only because Puritanism's sacralizing of America as the “chosen nation” and the Republican epideictic's canonization of the “Founding Fathers” created a potent civil religion. As Douglass (1999) would put it in a biting speech, slavery thrived

in the midst of a people professing, not merely republicanism, not merely democratical institutions, but civilization; nay, more—Christianity, in its highest, purest, and broadest sense; claiming to be the heaven-appointed nation, in connection with the British, to civilize, Christianize, and evangelize the world. (p. 60)

But it was also because of these two genres' control of time. For as Bercovitch (1978) has observed, the American jeremiad did not only look to the future. It also looked to the past, if only to urge that it be superseded. In the 19th century, the revolutionary fathers were the Moses and John the Baptist of American civil religion. And in the 19th century, no other genre succeeded in the construction of that glorious American past as the Republican epideictic. If therefore, as Edwin Black has argued, the 19th century American epideictic defined the limit of American memory by florid displays of normality and repression of bad conscience, the American jeremiad attempted to

determine the limit of the American future. As Bercovitch has argued, “The ritual import of the jeremiad” was “to sustain process by imposing control, and to justify control by presenting a certain form of process as the only road to the future kingdom” (p. 24).

Douglass intended to break open this prison house of time. Like other abolitionists, his rhetoric, especially in the 1850s, often echoed with the cadences of the American jeremiad (Pitney, 1986). Nonetheless, against the metaphysical unfulfillment advertised by Puritanism, he related the crisis of the time to its material, concrete causes—slavery and racism. Douglass (1999) ridiculed a campaign by the American Bible Society to raise money in order to buy bibles for slaves as “a sham, a delusion, and a snare.” His critique cuts deeply:

The immediate and only effect of their efforts must be to turn off attention from the main and only momentous question connected with the slave, and absorb energies and money in giving to him the Bible that ought to be used in giving him to himself. (p. 87)

Moreover, Douglass’s tone often departs in significant ways from that of the American jeremiad. The American jeremiad, Bercovitch (1978) argued, proclaimed “the threat of divine retribution” “with a ferocity unparalleled in the European pulpit” (p. 8). Douglass’s tone is, to be sure, marked by ferocity, but it is often ferocious incredulity. The Puritan’s ferocity is that of the true believer, that is, the believer’s fear in God’s wrath and the believer’s loathing of the depraved sinner; that of Douglass is accented not by belief, but disbelief, in particular a disbelief that the slaveholder really does believe that slaves are things. Thus, his voice is tinged with ridicule rather than damnation (Douglass, 1999, pp. 60–61). This tone of incredulity was often leavened with satire, irony, and wit. As Granville Ganter (2003) has brilliantly argued, although “Douglass had worked with melancholy, pathos, and controlled indignation on tour, he was far better remembered as a speaker for his sarcasm and wit” (p. 535).

Conclusion

This paper argues that Frederick Douglass articulated a distinctively radical rhetoric. Of the many legacies of Douglass, it is perhaps his articulation of the contours and stakes of radicalism that students of public discourse may most need to be reminded of. For Douglass, these stakes were primarily threefold. First, Douglass shows that the importance of radicalism lies in challenging the doxa, the very presuppositions, of a polity. Radicalism is therefore the epistemological work of shattering the political unconscious of terror that structures the boundaries of common sense and consensus. Second, Douglass’s embodiment of radicalism, his articulation of the material stakes of ideology, demonstrates how intertwined the ends of radicalism are to the means chosen for its accomplishment. Against those who would refuse any engagement with the exigencies of context, Douglass offers a critique of purity, maximalism, and the making of politics into theology. Against those who would reduce social change to quietist reformism, Douglass demonstrates that the normative horizon of radicalism

must be utopian in the best sense of the word. In articulating radicalism as an ethos, Douglass also foregrounds the limits of radicalism—both in the sense of the individual limits of radicals and the ethical limits without which radicalism becomes reactionary. Lastly, Douglass offers lessons on the style of radicalism. He offered an expansive account of radicalism that decisively rejected its reduction to questions of tone and civility. He showed the inextricability of form to content, style to substance.

This paper also presents an account of Douglass that aims to illuminate the many dimensions of his radicalism. Douglass has all too often been folded far too quickly into a “safe” radicalism wherein he fitted into the dominant American ideologies and rhetorical style. What this paper endeavored to do was point out how Douglass was distinctive. His epistemology and ideology was as much a skillful critique of these dominant ideologies as it was a strategic deployment of these ideologies. Moreover, Douglass is not easily folded into a nationalist project. Even as he was a keen student of the American rhetorical tradition and did issue forth jeremiads, he also drew from other rhetorical traditions to offer perhaps the most versatile rhetorical repertoire in 19th-century America. The significance of this emerging picture of Douglass is an invitation for students of public discourse to reinvestigate the intersections of tradition, ideology, ethos, and agency inaugurated by Frederick Douglass.

Douglass’s rhetoric holds much interest to the field of rhetorical criticism. His radical rhetoric stood at the confluence of the many traditions that have gone into the making of African American rhetoric. Inasmuch as critical practice has often privileged the Greco-Roman and the Prophetic-Puritan traditions—to the extent of folding Douglass into these traditions—Douglass’s rhetorical practice may serve as a palimpsest to other traditions, such as, for example, the wisdom rhetorics of Africa. To the extent that Douglass’s prophetic wisdom is a rhetorical tradition, therefore, it offers not one history, but many histories, not a single space, but many spaces, and perhaps above all, articulations for future rhetorical traditions.

To be sure, Douglass’s own primary orientation was toward praxis and his radicalism may carry the greatest lessons for theorists and practitioners animated by the questions and burdens of justice and the articulation of contexts for the flourishing of life. His life was dedicated toward the abolishing of slavery and gestured toward a utopia of equality, justice, and freedom. In performing these values in his rhetorical practice, Douglass not only articulated an enduring and distinctive African American agency, but made immanent relationships of equality in a plural world, Blacks and Whites, men and women.

References

- Baker, H. (1984). *Blues, ideology, and Afro-American literature: A vernacular theory*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Bentor, E. (1988). Life as an artistic process: Ibo Ikenga and Ofo. *African Arts*, 21, 66–69.
- Bercovitch, S. (1978). *The American jeremiad*. Madison, WI: The University of Wisconsin.
- Black, E. (1978). The sentimental style as escapism or the devil with Dan’l Webster. In K. K. Campbell & K. H. Jamieson (Eds.), *Form and genre: Shaping rhetorical action* (pp. 70–81). Falls Church, VA: Speech Communication Association.

- Chase, J. R. (1961). The classical conception of epideictic. *Quarterly Journal of Speech*, 47, 293–300.
- Conley, T. M. (1984). The enthymeme in perspective. *Quarterly Journal of Speech*, 70, 168–187.
- Darsey, J. (1997). *The prophetic tradition and radical rhetoric in America*. New York: New York University Press.
- Deacon, A. (2003). Navigating the storm, the whirlwind, and the earthquake: Re-assessing Frederick Douglass, the orator. *The Rocky Mountain Review of Language and Literature*, 57, 65–83.
- Douglass, F. (1967). *Life and times of Frederick Douglass*. New York: Collier Books.
- Douglass, F. (1982). *Narrative of the life of Frederick Douglass, an American slave: Written by himself*. New York: Penguin Classics.
- Douglass, F. (1999). In P. S. Foner (Ed.), *Frederick Douglass: Selected speeches and writings*. Chicago: Lawrence Hill Books.
- Douglass, F. (2003). *My bondage and my freedom*. New York: Penguin Books.
- Fanuzzi, R. (1999). The trouble with Douglass's body. *The American Transcendental Quarterly*, 13, 27–49.
- Fliegelman, J. (1993). *Declaring independence: Jefferson, natural language, and the culture of performance*. Stanford: Stanford University Press.
- Ganter, G. (2003). He made us laugh: Frederick Douglass's humor. *African American Review*, 37, 535–552.
- Gibson, D. B. (1990). Faith, doubt, and apostasy: Evidence of things unseen in Frederick Douglass's narrative. In E. J. Sundquist (Ed.), *Frederick Douglass: New literary and historical essays* (pp. 84–94). Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Hall, G. M. (2005). *Slavery and African ethnicities in the Americas: Restoring the links*. Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press.
- Jasinski, J. (1997). Rearticulating history in epideictic discourse: Frederick Douglass's 'The meaning of the Fourth of July to the negro'. In T. W. Benson (Ed.), *Rhetoric and political culture in nineteenth-century America* (pp. 71–89). East Lansing, MI: Michigan State University Press.
- Lucaites, J. L. (1997). The irony of equality in black abolitionist discourse: The case of Frederick Douglass's what to the slave is the Fourth of July? In T. W. Benson (Ed.), *Rhetoric and political culture in nineteenth-century American* (pp. 47–69). East Lansing, MI: Michigan State University Press.
- Marx, K. (1996). *The eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte*. New York: Cambridge University Press.
- Nzegwu, N. U. (2006). *Family matters: Feminist concepts in African philosophy of culture*. New York: State University of New York Press.
- Pitney, D. H. (1986). The enduring black jeremiad: The American jeremiad and black protest rhetoric, from Frederick Douglass to W. E. B. Dubois, 1841–1991. *American Quarterly*, 38, 481–492.
- Poulakos, J., & Poulakos, T. (1999). *Classical rhetorical theory*. Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company.
- Stuckey, S. (1990). Ironic tenacity: Frederick Douglass's seizure of the dialectic. In E. J. Sundquist (Ed.), *Frederick Douglass: New literary and historical essays* (pp. 23–46). Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Sundquist, E. J. (1993). *To wake the nations: Race in the making of American literature*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press.
- Van Leer, D. (1990). The anxiety of ethnicity in Douglass's narrative. In E. J. Sundquist (Ed.), *Frederick Douglass: New literary and historical essays* (pp. 118–140). Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press.
- Williamson, J. (1986). *A rage for order: Black-White relationships in the American south since emancipation*. New York: Oxford University Press.