THE POWERS OF DIGNITY

THE BLACK POLITICAL PHILOSOPHY OF FREDERICK DOUGLASS

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IN MEMORY OF JOHN LEWIS

AND TO ALL READERS OF FREDERICK DOUGLASS

PAST, PRESENT, AND TO COME

From this little bit of experience—slave experience—I have elaborated quite a lengthy chapter of political philosophy, applicable to the American people.

FREDERICK DOUGLASS,
"Sources of Danger to the Republic" (1867)

≈

Confronted with the master's outrageous effort to deny him all dignity, the slave even more than the master came to know and to desire passionately this very attribute. For dignity, like love, is one of those human qualities that are most intensely felt and understood when they are absent—or unrequited.

ORLANDO PATTERSON, *Slavery and Social Death: A Comparative Study* (1982)

≈

For people of color have always theorized—but in forms quite different from the Western form of abstract logic. And I am inclined to say that our theorizing (and I intentionally use the verb rather than the noun) is often in narrative forms, in the stories we create, in riddles and proverbs, in the play with language, since dynamic rather than fixed ideas seem more to our liking. How else have we managed to survive with such spiritedness the assault on our bodies, social institutions, countries, our very humanity?

BARBARA CHRISTIAN, "The Race for Theory" (1987)

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ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

This book draws upon an impressive body of earlier scholarship. Like all who study Frederick Douglass, I am deeply indebted to Benjamin Quarles, Philip S. Foner, John W. Blassingame, and John R. McKivigan for their pioneering work in editing and making available Douglass's voluminous writings. And like all who study Black American political thought, I am deeply indebted to Leonard Harris's pioneering collection, *Philosophy Born of Struggle*. As well, I have leaned heavily on intellectual histories of Douglass's thought by Waldo E. Martin Jr. and David Blight, and on biographies of Douglass by Blight, Benjamin Quarles, William McFeely, and Dickson J. Preston.

Over the past thirty years, the field of nineteenth-century African American literary studies has produced an extraordinary corpus of scholarship on Douglass and many other Black American writers of that time. Like all who work in this field today, I owe everything to those who created it, especially (in my case) Houston Baker, Henry Louis Gates Jr., and Robert Stepto; these scholars emphasized, in both word and deed, the importance of approaching Black cultural production through what Gates called a "black hermeneutic" instead of assuming that the interpretive methods and interests developed through the study of white artists would suffice. With respect to Douglass's autobiographies specifically, I have learned most from work by William A. Andrews, Eric J. Sundquist, Robert S. Levine, and John Stauffer. Their example has guided me to give historical texture to a book that addresses questions raised primarily in the field of political theory, and their scholarship continuously reminds us that Douglass's writings are not a transparent window into his thought, but rather his complex engagement with his historical moment, a self-representation that mounts a continuing, adaptive, and disruptive intervention in that period's field of representations.

Not surprisingly, Douglass's political thought has received its most intensive examination in the fields of philosophy and political theory. Peter C. Myers and Nick Buccola have argued that it closely resembles John Locke's natural rights liberalism, and Robert Gooding-Williams has suggested that it can be helpfully illuminated using Phillip Pettit's conception of freedom as nondomination. Philosopher Bernard Boxill was the first to perceive and explore—in richly various ways—Douglass's abiding interest in human dignity, and Frank Kirkland has made a strong case for the ways Douglass's ethical thinking is Kantian in spirit. I have learned a great deal from these and other scholars who have studied Douglass's political thought, and my own work draws often upon theirs. My aim, however, has been somewhat different. I do not try to determine where Douglass stands in the multiple traditions of Black, continental, and American political thought. Instead, I try to get to the bottom of what he meant when he claimed to have elaborated a political philosophy from his experience of enslavement. This path of inquiry was first opened up by Angela Y. Davis, and subsequently, it has been further illumined by Neil Roberts. Philosopher George Yancy has insisted for decades that Douglass was a *Black* thinker, shaped by the distinctive historical experience of Black Americans. I am grateful to these scholars for showing the way.

I would also like to thank the John Simon Guggenheim Foundation and the Charles Warren Center at Harvard University for fellowships that enabled me to bring this book to completion. Led by Brandon Terry and Kirsten Weld, the seminar at the Warren Center helped me bring depth and precision to my still inchoate thoughts about Douglass's political thought. This is also the place to acknowledge the individuals who wrote generous letters supporting my applications for those fellowships: they know who they are, and I thank them, deeply. Thanks, too, to Lewis Gordon, Jane Gordon, and their colleagues at the University of Connecticut for giving me a chance to share my work there, and to Neil Roberts for inviting me to participate in a superb and very helpful seminar he convened at Williams College in the spring of 2019. I am very thankful also for all that I have learned from the uniquely congenial group of scholars who, with the supportive participation of George Shulman and Cristina Beltrán, convene the Democratic Vistas Seminar annually at New York University.

Early versions of parts of this book have appeared in a number of journals and edited collections: the *American Scholar*, *American Literary History*, *Political Theory*, *Critical Philosophy of Race*, and *A Political Companion to Frederick Douglass*. I am grateful to their publishers and their editors for encouraging my work and allowing some of it to reappear, though usually in quite different form, in this volume. Here I want to single out in particular Gordon Hutner, editor of *American Literary History*, for his extraordinarily astute and generous help in making my political theory interests more legible to the field of literary studies.

Over the years, I have had many opportunities to think about Douglass with students. I am especially grateful to a number of graduate students with whom I have been lucky to work closely on Douglass and on African American political thought, including Marissa Carrere, Samantha Davis, Sean Gordon, Casey Hayman, Maria Ishikawa, Daniel Joslyn, Leslie Leonard, Russell Nurick, and Nirmala Iswari Vasigaren. For their continuing and generous support, I am grateful also to the Department of English at the University of Massachusetts, Amherst and its chair, Randall Knoper, and to Julie Hayes, dean of the College of the Humanities and Fine Arts.

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INTRODUCTION

"The Thing Looked Absurd"

The Black in Douglass's Political Philosophy

On April 20, 1847, Frederick Douglass returned to the United States from an eighteen-month abolitionist speaking tour in Britain. He had fled there in 1845 fearing that his master Thomas Auld might send agents into New England to recapture him after the publication of his best-selling *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, an American Slave*, which had made his whereabouts widely known. Now, at the age of twenty-nine, he was legally a free man because his English supporters had purchased him from Auld and then formally freed him. Now, he was also a celebrated international figure who had addressed enormous crowds in Ireland, Scotland, and England. And now, he had ambitious new plans for himself: he aimed to found and edit a newspaper addressed primarily to free Black readers living in the North. Revisiting his decision to found the *North Star* in *My Bondage and My Freedom* (his second version of his autobiography, published in 1855), he explained his primary motive: he had believed that "a tolerably well conducted press, in the hands of persons of the despised race, by . . . *making them acquainted with their own latent powers* [and] by enkindling among them the hope that for them there is a future . . . would prove a most powerful means of removing prejudice, and of awakening an interest in them."[1] Somewhat to his surprise, however, when he arrived in Boston and shared his plan with colleagues in William Lloyd Garrison's Massachusetts Anti-Slavery Society, they were skeptical. "My American friends looked at me with astonishment!" Douglass recalls. "'A wood-sawyer' offering himself up to the public as

an editor! A slave, brought up in the very depths of ignorance, assuming to instruct the highly civilized people of the north in the principles of liberty, justice, and humanity! The thing looked absurd" (390).

To his "American friends," Douglass's plan to become a public philosopher engaged with the political challenges facing both free Black and white Americans seemed "absurd"—and in a sense it was. It preposterously reversed a worldview that had come to feel natural to them: they assumed that only free persons can know what freedom is; that only those who think freely know what thought is; that only those who take for granted that they are subjects gazing on a world of objects know what knowledge is. Reading Douglass's recollections of his friends' reactions to his plan reminds us that, as philosopher Charles Mills has observed: "Insofar as . . . persons are conceived of as having their personhood uncontested, insofar as their culture and cognition are unhesitatingly respected, insofar as their moral prescriptions take for granted an already achieved citizenship and a history of freedom—insofar, that is, as race is not an issue for them, then they are already tacitly positioned as white persons, culturally and cognitively European, racially privileged members of the West."[2] Did Douglass aim to expose the unconscious workings of this white logic in his friends when, ironically mimicking their reaction, he described his ambitions as "absurd"? I think so.

What is certain is that when he founded the *North Star*, he aimed both to encourage his Black readers to be more conscious of their "latent powers" *and* to "instruct" all the American people in the "principles" of their democracy. What linked these two objectives? The short answer, as we shall see, was *white racism*. The longer answer, as I hope to show, was the distinctive political philosophy he had begun to work out as a response to racism. As he would claim himself some twenty years later: "From this little bit of experience—slave experience—I have elaborated quite a lengthy chapter of political philosophy, applicable to the American people."[3] In the book that follows, I have tried to bring into view this particular "chapter" of Douglass's political thought—that is, the part of it that originated in his experience of enslavement, that he honed through his labors as a Black public intellectual, and that he used to promote Black political solidarity, to contest white racism, and to transform the nation's understanding of democracy and democratic citizenship.

The Centrality of Human Powers

It is already well known that Douglass was a political thinker. Seeking to describe and explain his political thought, most scholars have argued that it belongs in one or more of the traditions of political thought he would have encountered after escaping enslavement. Historian Philip Foner, for one, has argued that Douglass and other Black intellectuals of his time identified strongly with "the republican traditions of the eighteenth century, particularly as expressed in the Declaration of Independence and the Constitution."[4] Robert Gooding-Williams has also placed Douglass in the tradition of republican political thought, whereas Peter C. Myers and Nick Buccola have marshaled an impressive quantity of evidence to argue that Douglass is best understood as a natural rights liberal. More recently, literary scholar Maurice Lee has persuasively demonstrated Douglass's indebtedness to Scottish Common Sense philosophers, while Douglas Jones has made a very strong case for Ralph Waldo Emerson's influence on him.[5] All of these readings of Douglass's political thought are historically informed and cogently argued; indeed, their findings—if taken as a partial and not a comprehensive account of his thought—are virtually incontrovertible.[6] However, my own focus is on the aspects of Douglass's political philosophy that he traced back to his "slave experience."[7] This dimension *cannot* be assimilated to these traditions but, rather, evades, supplements, or challenges them. And just here a less familiar Douglass becomes visible.

This Douglass did not begin his philosophical thinking, as philosopher George Yancy emphasizes, "with the abstract Cartesian 'I think,' but with a rich description of subjectivity whose historicity was linked to the Middle Passage and shaped by a racist discursive vortex."[8] A close look at that "rich description" reveals that the key word in his political lexicon is "powers," and that an attunement to power is what most markedly distinguishes his "chapter" of political philosophy from the prevailing currents of political theorizing in his time. This should not be surprising. "The slave has all his life been learning the power of his master" (352), he observed in *My Bondage and My Freedom*, and he had that power of oppressors in mind when he declared, so famously, that "power concedes nothing without a demand. It never did, and it never will."[9] What the master's power aimed for, Douglass had come to believe, was the utter submission of the enslaved through the destruc-

tion or appropriation of their own powers. As he pointed out in an 1847 speech he delivered in England: "The slave had no power to alter his relation—no assent or dissent to give in the matter—no voice in his own destiny. His mind, as a mental, moral, and responsible being, was blotted out from existence; he was cut off from his race; dragged down from the high elevation where God had placed him—'a little lower than the angels'—and ranked with the beasts of the field. All his powers were in the hands of another."[10]

Yet this speech somewhat overstates the case and misrepresents the totality of his thought, for Douglass more frequently asserted that the resilient powers of the enslaved never could be entirely "blotted out from existence." As he insisted in an 1851 speech: "Dark as is the lot of the slave yet he knows he is not a beast, but is as truly a man as his master. Nothing can make the slave think that he is a beast; he feels the instincts of manhood within him at all times, and consequently there is a perpetual war going on between the master and slave, and to keep the slave down the whip and fetters are absolutely necessary."[11] From his personal experience of this "war" between master and slave, Douglass elaborated a political philosophy that had *power* at its core—the power of the slave master as he sought to disempower the enslaved, and the powers of the enslaved as they struggled to resist. These powers of the enslaved were not granted by law or custom. Rather, as he would argue, they were lodged in the very *being* of the enslaved as human beings. Indeed, Douglass came to believe that these powers constitute the very humanness of all humans and make possible their development of their human worth, or human dignity. And so, as we shall see, while he used the conventional language of natural rights philosophy to assert that "the great truth of man's right to liberty entered into the very idea of man's creation," he interjected his own distinctive philosophy when he added that "man's right to liberty is written upon all the powers and faculties of man."[12] We cannot understand Douglass's thinking about Black politics, democracy, and citizenship until we see how his concern with power permeates all of these.

Angela Y. Davis was the first to point out that Douglass's work offers a radical analysis of the concept of freedom, one that reveals that while "the slave is actually conscious of the fact that freedom is not a fact, . . . is not a given, but rather something to be fought for, . . . [t]he slave master . . . experiences his freedom as inalienable and thus

as a fact: he is not aware that he too has been enslaved by his own system."[13] Political theorist Neil Roberts has further explored Douglass's distinctive political philosophy by arguing that he developed a notion of "comparative freedom," one that is cognizant of freedom's contingency and limitations.[14] Building on these profound insights, I would suggest further that Douglass sometimes aimed to show his white readers that *their* freedom, too—not just the freedom of the slave master and the enslaved—was far less absolute and given than they supposed. The problem was not just that they were "enslaved by their own system" (though that was sometimes the case), but that their freedom was not a settled question and never would be. Like Black Americans, then, they must be prepared to wage an endless struggle to establish and maintain it, for themselves individually and for all other citizens. In short, Douglass's theory of democratic citizenship insists that freedom is never secure for anyone. Because those with more power will inevitably seek to limit or even destroy it, we always have a "duty to perform"—that of exercising our powers and thereby preserving our freedom and our democracy. Along with many other antebellum Black writers, as literary historian Derrick Spires has shown, Douglass believed that "citizenship . . . is not a thing determined by who one is but rather by what one does."[15]

White Racism, Black Politics, and the Need for a New Public Philosophy

By the early 1850s if not sooner, Douglass had concluded that in order to defeat both the slavery system and the anti-Black racism that was its "foundation," both Black and white Americans would have to radically revise their understanding of democracy and democratic citizenship.[16] As political theorist Juliet Hooker has argued, he "was committed to working toward the refoundation of the U.S. polity on more egalitarian terms; he envisioned its radical transformation based on an expansive notion of multiraciality that would decenter whiteness."[17] Such a refoundation was necessary because the nation's public philosophy was manifestly unable to remedy three intertwined, mutually reinforcing problems: it did not explain why Black Americans (or any Americans, for that matter) were entitled to full membership in a democratic polity; it did not provide a convincing account of why individual citizens join

together to form a political community in the first place; and it did not encourage citizens to take action against injustice either on their own behalf or in defense of other citizens.[18]

All these shortcomings can be seen within the Declaration's famous assertion that "all men are created equal, endowed by their Creator with certain inalienable Rights," including the rights to life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness.[19] First, it offers no substantive conception of "man" beyond the assertion that he is "endowed" with rights. Such vagueness works well until some members of a nation are deemed *not* to be men; then, when they claim their rights, they are put in the position of first having to establish that they are men—but what *is* a "man"? The nation's public philosophy did not say—and still does not say—probably because Thomas Jefferson and the other founders, all of them white, could simply take their status as humans for granted. And that complacence, as Charles Mills observes, is the very essence of white privilege. Similarly, the Declaration does not explain or even hint *why* any humans are *worthy* of the rights with which they are endowed. What is it about man, as a species of being, that makes plausible the belief that every man is entitled to certain rights? Without an answer to that question made explicit in the nation's public philosophy, all new claimants to those rights lacked—and still lack—an adequate philosophical basis on which to establish that they, too, are worthy of them.

The Declaration's second shortcoming is that it offers no broad, affective basis on which citizens might build and sustain a political community. In answer to the question of what binds individuals into a democratic polity, natural rights liberalism names only "self-interest." But the pursuit of individual self-interest, or "happiness," cannot provide the feelings of mutual belonging and solidarity required to create and sustain a self-governing community. Consequently, citizens may be disposed to turn to *supplementary* sources of political and social solidarity, such as nationalism, race, and gender. This is arguably the case today, and it was certainly true in the antebellum period, when native-born white men claimed increasingly that they were the *only* legitimate possessors of democratic political rights in the United States. Finally, the third flaw in the nation's public philosophy was that it imagined citizenship as a status, and the citizen as a passive holder of rights. Although the belief that democratic rights are "endowed," not won, provides a broad theoretical basis for universal democratic citizenship, it implies

that these rights are real and secure until a tyrant tries to take them away. But Douglass and many other Black political thinkers of his time saw that such a view of citizenship and rights tends to make citizens quiescent in the face of more subtle forms of oppression and indifferent, or even resistant, to the arguments made by new claimants to democratic rights.

Perceiving all these shortcomings in the nation's understanding of democracy and citizenship, Douglass believed that as a Black activist intellectual he would have to do more than assail and defeat the slavery system; he would also have to develop and promote a radically new interpretation of America's public philosophy. For this reason, his well-known turn to political abolitionism in the early 1850s marks not just his recognition that abolitionists should employ political means to overthrow slavery. It reflects as well his intuition—rapidly becoming a conviction—that abolitionists would have to devise a new political *philosophy,* one that could fight more effectively against the menace of anti-Black racism.[20] He knew, of course, that such a philosophy would have to draw often and enthusiastically upon Americans' traditional public philosophy—a hybrid of natural-rights liberalism, republicanism, and Scottish philosophy. This was, after all, the only political lexicon that most Americans understood and endorsed, and he would have to speak their language. But he realized, too, that he would have to supplement that language, or inflect it, so as to render it more competent to redress the failings of a racist slaveholding polity.[21] Where might he—and Americans—find such a transformative supplement? The answer already lay at hand: for it was his experience of enslavement, and his perspective as a raced other, that had first spurred him to perceive the flaws not just in the nation's comportment but in the public philosophy through which it imagined and constructed its political subjects and community. These origins in his experience are precisely what makes Douglass's "chapter" of political philosophy a *Black* political philosophy, even though he thought it "applicable" not just to Black political struggle but to the entire U.S. polity.[22]

Early in his career, and increasingly as he committed himself to philosophizing, Douglass saw that he would have to do much more than present his political ideas for public inspection and adoption. Because he spoke to white audiences as a person of African descent, and one whose political insights emerged in large part from Black experi-

ence, he could not even be heard by many of them; indeed, he could not be seen by many as a being who could legitimately address them, and so he was frequently put in the absurd position of having to establish his credentials as a fully human person before he could begin his actual discourse. As well, because he knew firsthand the brutalities of the Southern bondage system, and because he insisted that virtually all white citizens of the United States benefited from that system, he was the bearer of bad news that most white Americans did not want to hear. Most were just as invested in white innocence as the readers whom James Baldwin aimed to disabuse in the 1960s. Consequently, every time Douglass spoke or wrote, he did so knowing that the language he had at his disposal might work against expressing what was most radical and unsettling in his thought. This is why his thinking is frequently marked by seeming contradiction, inconsistency, indeterminacy, and paradox. Instead of viewing these qualities suspiciously as mistakes, however, we should welcome and investigate them as clues. They are indications of the energy of his intellectual aspirations, and they mark the seams along which those aspirations collided with the world—physical, linguistic, conceptual—into which he was thrown.

In order to communicate his philosophy to his audiences (Black and white), Douglass had to craft a distinctive rhetorical style. But "style" can be a misleading term here unless we understand that it did more than just ornament his thinking, or package it. At a deeper level, his style also *structured* his thinking. Its key elements were irony, awareness of what we now call "standpoint," a rhetorical move I will call "reversal" or "chiasmus," and a visceral antipathy to categorical divisions of all kinds. One of his favorite techniques, combining standpoint awareness, irony, and chiasmus, was to reverse the field of vision, so that the object seen becomes the subject who sees. In his incisive 1881 essay on color prejudice, for example, he recalls: "A good but simple-minded Abolitionist said to me that he was not ashamed to walk with me down Broadway arm-in arm, in open daylight, and evidently thought he was saying something that must be very pleasing to my self importance, but it occurred to me, at the moment, that this man does not dream of any reason why I might be ashamed to walk arm-in-arm with him through Broadway in open daylight."[23] The structure of this anecdote is itself a chiasmic reversal: it pivots on his phrase "but it occurred to me" and then proceeds to show how the world looks through the oppo-

site end of the telescope. To the mind of one who had experienced both enslavement and freedom, and who could move fluidly from one standpoint to another, how "simple-minded" were all those Americans who did not know that they saw things from a particular standpoint—and how in need of "instruction" in the "principles of liberty, justice, and humanity."

This Douglass—a self-consciously Black political philosopher concerned with both the problems of Black politics and the need to transform the racist white American polity—will seem both familiar and strange to many of my readers. Consider, for example, the light he sheds on the slavery system and the experience of enslavement. On the one hand, he confirms much that is already established: that the slavery system sought to dehumanize the enslaved, not just deprive them of freedom; that it both denied and recognized the humanity of its slaves; that individual slaveholders both enjoyed personal relationships with the enslaved and used those relationships as instruments of their own power and domination; and that the enslaved resisted their enslavement in countless small ways, and also in more frequent acts of overt and defiant rebellion than the historical record has readily admitted. At the same time, my account of Douglass's distinctive political philosophy reveals also that the experience of enslavement fostered a commonsense adoption of what we now call "standpoint epistemology"; it also promoted the development of a disposition that held all persons to be inextricably interconnected, so that no matter how much a slaveholder might strive to distance himself from the beings he had enslaved, he could not do so without distancing himself also from his own human nature. The more we attend to these aspects of Douglass's thought, the more clearly we will see that he was a far more feminist thinker, both by his day's standards and ours, than we have perceived heretofore.

Douglass's writings suggest further that while the enslaved perceived how profoundly the slavery system's culture and ideology shaped the world they lived in, they did not therefore conclude that *everything* is a cultural construct; instead, as his famous description of their singing indicates, they held both these realms in tension with one another. As we shall see, all of these dispositions—so at odds with the prevailing temperament Douglass found in the North when he escaped to freedom—critically shaped the intellect that would later claim to have elaborated a chapter of political philosophy from his experience of enslave-

ment.[24] But they also contributed to the challenges he faced later when he tried to convey that philosophy to his audiences. Those challenges rise again to confront anyone who attempts to convey that philosophy today. Thus, even as I employ words like "Black" and "feminist" in this summary account of Douglass's thought, I must emphasize that these terms do no more than gesture toward its contours. Like the labels "republican," "liberal," "nationalist," and "assimilationist," they describe it only imperfectly. To name how his political thought both evokes and evades these and other such categories, I have turned to yet another familiar term: "fugitive." Douglass's political thought is indeed a *fugitive* mode of political thinking—but, here again, not always in the senses of that term most prevalent today.[25]

For a second preview of the ways my account of Douglass's political philosophy will be both familiar and strange, consider also how the words "humanity" and "dignity" have been used as descriptors of his thought. Historian David Blight, for example, has observed that "for black Americans, the [Civil] war took on the deepest possible meaning: it was both an end and a new beginning of a long struggle to achieve freedom and dignity out of oppression."[26] Political scientist Michael Dawson, who identifies Douglass as a "black radical egalitarian liberal," posits that Black liberals "argue for the . . . recognition of the humanity and dignity of all individuals within a political community."[27] Orlando Patterson writes, "Confronted with the master's outrageous effort to deny him all dignity, the slave even more than the master came to know and to desire passionately this very attribute."[28] Waldo Martin refers often to Douglass's "egalitarian humanism" and observes that Douglass "understood his people's need for dignity and self-respect."[29] Literary historian Douglas Jones observes that "Douglass . . . broadens the political significance of American Transcendentalism, beckoning us to 'throw off sleep' and 'awaken' to the ways in which racial difference shrouds our perception of the other's dignity and divinity."[30] As all these examples suggest, we have long been accustomed to suppose that Douglass's political thought valued humanity and dignity. But have we often enough paused to ask what Douglass *meant* when he spoke of "humanity" and "dignity?" For that matter, have we often enough asked what *we* mean by them? Many of my readers will be familiar with Douglass's famous claim, in *My Bondage and My Freedom,* that "a man without force is without the essential dignity of humanity" (286). They might

also know his claim that "next to the dignity of being a free man, is the dignity of striving to be free"; and they might even be aware of his frequent references to the "unity and dignity of the human family."[31] But as I hope this book will show, we have not yet sufficiently investigated and unpacked the meaning of these formulations, much less followed the path that Douglass's deep interest in dignity and humanity indicates.[32] Yet these two concerns, along with his abiding preoccupation with power, constitute the core of the political philosophy he elaborated from his experience of enslavement.

I came to Douglass's political philosophy as a literary historian steeped in the interests and methods of nineteenth-century U.S. literary and cultural studies who had swerved into and become fascinated by the field of political theory. Not surprisingly, I have come to feel that a synthesis of both these disciplines is required in order to do some justice to the complexity of Douglass's thought and its rhetorical sophistication. Yet, as Stanley Fish pointed out decades ago, interdisciplinarity is so very hard to do. No single book can meet the expectations of multiple disciplines. My colleagues in U.S. and African American literary studies will probably want more history and less philosophy than I offer here, whereas my friends in the fields of political theory and Black political thought will perhaps ask for less history and more engagement with the traditions of political philosophy. I recall vividly the afternoon when I was explaining to a friend who is a renowned scholar what Douglass meant by "dignity" and how it resembled but also differed from Kant's understanding of the word. After listening patiently, he replied with a look of perplexity: "So is *that* the kind of thing political theorists talk about at their conferences?" Yes, sometimes it is.

Finally, it's worth emphasizing that my subject here is the *distinctive* chapter of political philosophy Douglass elaborated from his experience of enslavement, not the whole of his political thought, much less a complete intellectual biography of him. This means that in the following pages, some topics that interest both disciplines will receive little if any attention. For example, the transnational dimensions of Douglass's political thinking have been variously explored by scholars in both fields, including (among many others) Paul Giles, Paul Gilroy, Robert Levine, Juliet Hooker, Christopher Hanlon, Ifeoma Nwanko, Millery Polyné, Cody Marrs, and Fionnghuala Sweeney. Yet this rich topic falls beyond my scope: although Douglass certainly drew on the cosmopolitan and

transnational perspective that he acquired during his first trip to Britain and later travel to Haiti, and although he increasingly positioned U.S. democracy in a global and hemispheric context, his "chapter of political philosophy" was fundamentally a response to anti-Black racism *within* the United States. This is why, with characteristic attunement to standpoint location, he claimed that it was "applicable to the American people."

Outline of Chapters

This book begins by showing that Douglass started self-consciously to philosophize when he became fully aware of the contingent nature and malignant functions of white racism, founded the *North Star* to combat it, and then plunged into the debates within the Black community about what was often termed "the condition and destiny" of Blacks in the United States. Douglass's engagement with these topics, while already productively explored by other scholars, looks significantly different when we see how strongly it was shaped by his emergent, power-oriented political thinking.

The book's second chapter shows how his political thinking deepened into a political philosophy as he sought to counter racist assertions that Blacks were not actually human, a task that required him to develop a more robust yet flexible conception of "the human" than liberalism, republicanism, and Scottish philosophy could offer. "For Douglass," as Robert Gooding-Williams has argued, "eradicating the institution of slavery require[d] a revolutionary refounding of the American polity, and hence a transformation of the norms of citizenship."[33] Such a refounding and transformation would require a new public philosophy of democracy, and this is what his own political thought proposed to offer. It is rooted in his proposition that humans are beings composed of several distinctive human powers, and that our conscious exercise of these is what accords us a worth, or dignity, one that merits respect from others and serves as the "foundation" of our natural rights.

Chapter 3 argues that the distinctiveness of Douglass's political thought resides (and must be found) not just in its substance, or in its propositions, but in its manner, or style—what I call his *fugitive rhetoric*. As Douglass aimed to give voice to what his experience of radical

unfreedom had shown him, he also had to meet the rhetorical challenges posed by his otherness as a former slave and by his racial subject position as a Black man speaking to skeptical, if not hostile, white audiences. Consequently, he did not just have thoughts that differed substantively from the thoughts of many persons who composed his audiences; he often thought in a different *way*, using what he called a different "method." As we shall see, his unusual mode of thinking is what James McCune Smith took pains to explain to readers in his introduction to *My Bondage and My Freedom*.

The book's fourth and fifth chapters return to Douglass's participation in the debates that roiled the antebellum Black public sphere. Chapter 4 focuses on his positions on the wisdom of Black emigration schemes and the legitimacy of violence as a weapon against slavery. Chapter 5 examines Douglass's famous change of mind regarding the constitutionality of slavery. In all of these instances, we find that topics that have been analyzed and debated by many historians appear in a different light when we approach them as expressions of Douglass's political philosophy, not just as a sequence of pragmatic political decisions prompted by contemporaneous political events. We discover in particular that what looked like "inconsistency" to many of his contemporaries—and to many Douglass scholars since then—was in fact a consistent expression of what he called his "method" of thinking, one that held binary "opposites" in tension rather than opting to choose between them.

Chapter 6 offers a reading of *My Bondage and My Freedom* as Douglass's retrospective investigation and representation of the origins of his political thought. Because he believed that his political philosophy had originated in his experience of enslavement, this second autobiography's more detailed account of his enslavement is, in part, a meditation on how that experience had yielded the insights he later elaborated philosophically. His investigation focuses on two key issues. First, what could he learn from his own experience about the act, or process, of political awakening—what French theorist Jacques Rancière has called "political subjectivization"?[34] What triggers the moment in which a person becomes an *active* political subject? Second, and closely related, Douglass consults his own experience to learn more about the nature of resistance: From what inner resources do oppressed persons draw in order to resist their oppression? What forms does their resistance take? The answers to these questions were critical to his efforts to awaken

Americans to take action against the evils of slavery and racism, and to his efforts to spur the free Black community to more active citizenship and more assertive resistance to racism.

Chapter 7 examines Douglass's responses to the end of the Civil War; the passage of the Thirteenth, Fourteenth, and Fifteenth Amendments; and the collapse of Reconstruction. In this new political environment, in which the formerly enslaved had been granted male suffrage and a significant measure of civil rights, he faced the discouraging fact that "the malignant spirit" of white racism was still abroad in the land. His speeches and writings in this period, commonly addressing themselves to either Black or white audiences, urged both to adopt certain dispositions and strategies of citizenship in their struggle against racism. Nothing less than "the soul of the nation" was at stake, he believed.[35] Again drawing on his experience of enslavement, Douglass understood racism to be a distinctive form of oppression, one that attacks not just the formal rights but also the human dignity of its targets. For this reason, he believed more strongly than ever that the struggle against racism must include a public philosophy with a robust conception of human nature, an explicit commitment to human dignity, and a vision of citizenship that recognizes human vulnerability and encourages collaborative practices of mutual respect.

This book's concluding chapter proposes that Douglass's fugitive political philosophy will always appear somewhat "strange, mysterious, indescribable," and suggests that the radical strangeness of Douglass's thought will enable it to offer an ongoing critical perspective on *all* versions of political philosophy that have originated within conditions of comparative freedom. I conclude, for this reason, that we should strive to honor Douglass's fugitivity rather than absorb his political thought fully into *any* tradition of Black or democratic political philosophy—including even those that have been described as "fugitive."

Douglass's Political Thought and the Afterlife of Slavery

Slavery has been formally abolished in the United States, but the racism that was both its cause and its effect persists, continuing to constrain and wound most if not all dark-skinned persons living in the United States today. Now, as in Douglass's time, the United States needs to de-

velop a different public philosophy of its democracy, one that articulates the value of the human and the citizen more concretely and vividly than does liberalism, less narrowly and exclusively than does republicanism, and without recourse to notions of community based on kinship, race, religion, or the nation-state. Douglass's theory of the human and the citizen offers one intriguing version of such a revision. As well, in our time as in Douglass's—perhaps *more* than in Douglass's—most Americans have a passive relation to their citizenship, rights, and government. The widespread belief that democratic citizenship is primarily about rights that we "possess" still discourages many from actualizing their rights by *acting* as citizens. The equally tenacious belief that citizenship is a status that is conferred still disposes many to suppose that citizenship can be fully attained and achieved when it is merely documented by the legal apparatus of the state. Douglass's power-centered conception of the human and the citizen, his linkage of freedom with responsibility, and his belief that democratic citizenship requires a democratic disposition all point the way toward a more dynamic, citizen-driven democracy.

For most of his life, Douglass steadfastly opposed the idea of Black American emigration to another place or country. He was also a firm believer in a multiracial, "composite" democracy that welcomed all races and ethnicities and privileged none. He cautiously avowed his belief in the "preponderance" of good over evil in the aggregate of human beings, and it was on this faith that he staked his loyalty to democracy and his belief that the majority of white citizens—perhaps just a bare majority—would be able to disburden themselves of the privilege and the prison of their racism.[36]

Would he have retained these beliefs had he lived through half a century of Jim Crow, then witnessed the rise of the prison-industrial complex, the mass incarceration of Blacks, and the twenty-first-century rebirth of unashamed white nationalism in the United States and across Europe? Or would he have become a pessimist? These are unanswerable questions, and I don't believe that the answers to them really matter anyway. After all, no intellectual or cultural legacy of the past is likely to be fully adequate to the problems of the present. In using it, we must be selective. And creative. This was one of Douglass's own beliefs: "We have to do with the past only as we can make it useful to the present and the future."[37] In the last analysis, then, it is not for this or any other book

to decide whether his political thought is useful today. Its usefulness can be discovered and proved—as Douglass repeatedly insisted—only if and when it is put into action.

Indeed, because Douglass undertook all his political thinking with specific political objectives in mind, his political theory is more a praxis-oriented guide to citizenship-as-struggle than a speculative account of the political. It does not deal with what democracy ideally should *be*, but with what citizens both Black and white ideally should *do*. It is under no illusion that an ideal polity can be brought into being and sustained through history; yet it also believes that democratic citizens *need* ideals to motivate and sustain their struggle for greater justice. While it urges citizens to understand themselves to be situated actors in a historically contingent world, it also insists that they hold themselves accountable to principles that are true "on all occasions, in all places."[38] It understands full well that democracy is a necessarily incomplete project achieved only when citizens collaboratively make headway against repeated and never-ending impositions of injustice by those who wield inordinate power. It warns that even fully enfranchised citizens who take all their rights for granted should recognize that their freedom is far from absolute or secure. It resists habits and traditions of thought that force choices instead of opening paths to new possibilities. It takes "democracy" and "citizenship" to be verbs, not nouns, and it urges citizens to make "a leap in the dark" and act in unavoidably risky and compromised ways to bring democracy—and themselves—into being (413).

NOTES

Abbreviations and Citations to the Autobiographies

FDP *The Frederick Douglass Papers, Series One: Speeches, Debates, and Interviews*, ed. John W. Blassingame et al., 5 vols. (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1979–92)

LW *The Life and Writings of Frederick Douglass,* ed. Philip S. Foner, 5 vols. (New York: International Publishers, 1950–75)

All three of Douglass's autobiographies—*Narrative of the Life of an American Slave*, *My Bondage and My Freedom*, and *Life and Times of Frederick Douglass*—are included in *Frederick Douglass: Autobiographies*, edited by Henry Louis Gates Jr. (New York: Library of America, 1994). With few exceptions, which are clearly indicated in the text, citations to the autobiographies, indicated by page numbers in parentheses, refer to this volume. For clarity, I also indicate in the text which of Douglass's three autobiographies I am discussing at that point.

Notes to Introduction

1. Douglass, *My Bondage and My Freedom*, 387 (emphasis added). All further page references will appear in the text.

2. Mills, *Blackness Visible*, xv.

3. FDP 4:160. Douglass's political philosophy is the subject of two excellent book-length studies, both of which argue that it is a form of natural rights liberalism. I have learned a great deal from both works, even while disagreeing with their theses. See Myers, *Frederick Douglass,* and Buccola, *Political Thought of Frederick Douglass*. I am also indebted to two superb intellectual histories of Douglass: Martin, *Mind of Frederick Douglass*, and Blight, *Frederick Douglass' Civil War*.

4. Quoted in Dawson, *Black Visions*, 29.

5. Gooding-Williams, *In the Shadow of Du Bois*; Myers, *Frederick Douglass*; Buccola, *Political Thought of Frederick Douglass*; Lee, *Slavery, Philosophy, and American Literature*;

Jones, "Douglass' Impersonal," 1–35. Jack Turner, too, has made a powerful case for an Emersonian Douglass in *Awakening to Race*.

6. My approach to Douglass thus joins the work of other scholars who, in a fairly recent critical and historical turn, urge that "our own approaches be shaped by the theories and practices developed by the black men and women who lived with the print we study." Fagan, *Black Newspaper and the Chosen Nation*, 10.

7. Davis, "Lectures on Liberation."

8. Yancy, *Black Bodies, White Gazes*, 157.

9. *FDP* 3:204.

10. *FDP* 2:9.

11. *FDP* 2:327.

12. *FDP* 2:261.

13. Davis, "Lectures on Liberation," 114.

14. Roberts, *Freedom as Marronage*, 53–88.

15. Spires, *Practice of Citizenship*, 3.

16. *FDP* 3:209.

17. Hooker, "'Black Sister to Massachusetts,'" 692.

18. Nick Buccola, too, argues that Douglass intended to renovate the nation's public philosophy: his aim "was to persuade the American people to accept a new liberal creed that would replace narrowness with egalitarianism and selfishness with humanitarianism." This, as I hope to show, is a partially true but too limited account of Douglass's aspiration and achievement, which cannot accurately be described as a "new liberal creed." Buccola, *Political Thought of Frederick Douglass*, 1.

19. Douglass repeatedly affirmed and famously described the Declaration as the "ringbolt to the nation's destiny." Nonetheless, he would not have elaborated his own chapter of political philosophy if he had thought that the Declaration's principles, as understood by his contemporaries, would suffice to defeat anti-Black racism. *FDP* 2:363.

20. By the early 1850s, as historian John Stauffer has shown, Douglass had affiliated himself with a band of radical abolitionists who belonged to both the moral suasion and political wings of the movement. They were prepared to work politically to end slavery, and they did not shrink from the use of violence if necessary. However, the most revolutionary aspect of their enterprise, Stauffer suggests, was an "ethic" that sought "to dismantle the various cultural dichotomies that posed obstacles to the new age"—"those of black and white, body and soul, sacred and profane, ideal and real, civilization and savagery, and masculine and feminine." Stauffer, *Black Hearts of Men*, 19, 7.

21. As we shall see, Douglass also deployed his political philosophy to counter the exclusion of women and immigrants from the U.S. polity. Unfortunately, he failed to take such strong positions in favor of Native Americans, whom he believed to be so different as to be incommensurable with it.

22. Robin Kelley's account of the differences between Paul Gilroy's and Cedric Robinson's "agendas" is instructive in this respect: "Gilroy's point, and one of his most important critical interventions, is . . . that Black people are products of the modern world, with a unique historical legacy rooted in slavery; Blacks are hybrid people with as much claim to the Western heritage as their former slave masters. Robinson, on the other hand, takes the same existential condition but comes to different conclusions: slavery did not define the Black condition because we were Africans first, with worldviews and philosophical notions about life, death, possession, community, and so forth that are rooted in that African heritage." Framed by this distinction, Douglass lends himself more to Gilroy's agenda than Robinson's, though with two caveats. First, Douglass was less interested in Blacks' "claim" to Western heritage than in a Black transformation of it. Second, as we shall see, Douglass offers a tantalizing hint that the ultimate source of his attunement to the values of self-respect, respect, and dignity was a quality of African culture kept alive within the slave community. Robin Kelley, foreword to Robinson, *Black Marxism*, xix.

23. *LW* 4:351.

24. As another example of what I've been describing as an entwining of the familiar and the unfamiliar in Douglass's thought as I describe it in this book, consider this statement by one of the guiding lights of my own work, Angela Y. Davis: "Let's attempt to arrive at a philosophical definition of the slave," she writes. "We have already stated the essence: he is a human being who, by some reason or another, is denied freedom. But is not the essence of the human being his freedom?" She states this definition of the slave a second time: "the very existence of the slave is a contradiction: he is a man who is not a man—that is, a man who does not possess the essential attribute of humanity, freedom." While there can be no doubt that freedom looms large in Douglass's political thought, and that he believed the enslaved knew something about it that free persons do not, a closer reading of it raises a searching question about Davis's assertions. *Is* freedom the "essential attribute of humanity"? If it is, then a man wholly deprived of freedom would *not* be a "contradiction": he would simply have become a being who is *no longer* a man. But, as Davis herself seems to believe, and as Douglass repeatedly affirmed, the slavery system never could succeed in utterly crushing the "spirit," "manhood," "soul," or "dignity" of the enslaved. In his mind, it followed therefore that the essential attribute of humanity must consist not just of freedom, but as well of human dignity. This insight, born of his "experience of slavery," is what Douglass brought to his reformulation of America's public philosophy. Davis, "Lectures on Liberation," 113, 122.

25. The terms "fugitivity" and "Black fugitivity" have been used in various ways by a number of scholars. For a helpfully succinct account of Black fugitivity, see Hooker, "'Black Sister to Massachusetts,'" 691–92. The fugitivity of Douglass's thought that I have been trying to describe in this book is perhaps best seen as, in Hooker's words, "embracing the intellectual orientations arising from fugitivity . . . and imagining alternate racial orders, futures, and forms of subjectivity" (691). However, I am not sure that Douglass himself saw his intellectual orientation as arising from his fugitivity—a state of perpetual flight and marginality he was eager to leave behind. Rather, as I have been trying to show, he traced it to his "slave experience" and refined it in his work as a comparatively free Black activist intellectual. See also Best and Hartman, "Fugitive Justice"; Hesse, "Escaping Liberty," 288–313.

26. Blight, *Frederick Douglass' Civil War*, 1.

27. Dawson, *Black Visions*, 254.

28. Patterson, *Slavery and Social Death*, 100. Orlando Patterson frequently uses "dignity" and "self-respect" as if they were synonymous and interchangeable, but as we shall see, Douglass (like some philosophers today) sharply distinguishes between these.

29. Martin, *Mind of Frederick Douglass*, 92, 93.

30. Jones, "Douglass' Impersonal," 27.

31. *FDP* 3:210; *FDP* 4:253.

32. Notable exceptions, as we shall see, include Bernard R. Boxill, Frank Kirkland, and Robert Gooding-Williams. However, while they carefully investigate what "dignity" might have meant to Douglass, they do not appreciate its value as one of the key terms in his philosophical lexicon.

33. Gooding-Williams, *In the Shadow of Du Bois*, 17.

34. Jacques Rancière defines politics as "an extremely determined activity antagonistic to . . . the tangible configuration whereby parties and parts or lack of them are defined by a presupposition that, by definition, has no place in that configuration—that of the part of those who have no part. . . . Political activity is whatever shifts a body from the place assigned to it or changes a place's destination. It makes visible what had no business being seen, and makes heard a discourse where once there was only place for noise." Political subjectification, for him, is that moment of "shift" in which a "body" (he prefers not to say "person") insists on a "place in that configuration." Rancière, *Dis-agreement*, 30–31. For an account of the ways Rancière's political thought does not quite account for Black American political struggle and reflection, see Bromell, "'That Third and Darker Thought,'" 261–88.

35. *FDP* 5:291.

36. FDP 4:173.

37. LW 2:188.

38. LW 2:185.

Notes to Chapter One

1. Blight, *Frederick Douglass*, 216.

2. Levine, *Martin Delany, Frederick Douglass*, 5. See also Peterson, *Doers of the Word*; Vogel, *Black Press*; Fanuzzi, *Abolition's Public Sphere*; J. Brooks, "Early American Public Sphere," 67–92; Foster, "Narrative of the Interesting Origins," 714–40; Fagan, *Black Newspaper*; Spires, *Practice of Citizenship*.

3. Peterson, *Doers of the Word*, 11.

4. As Derrick Spires points out, "We have yet to describe the degree to which black writers themselves conceptualized and transformed the meaning of citizenship in the early Republic." Spires, *Practice of Citizenship*, 2.

5. LW 1:94. McCune Smith goes on to sketch the pre-history of Douglass's involvement in the Black public sphere when he writes: "The Church question, the school question, separate institutions, are questions he enters upon and argues about as our weary but active young men thought about and argued about years ago, when we had Literary societies"(94). These words remind us that the Black public sphere Douglass entered full-time, so to speak, in 1848, had a history dating back to the eighteenth century if not earlier. As Joanna Brooks has argued: "The birth of black institutions and black print production in the 1780s and 1790s constitutes a crucial moment in the history of black thought about the public sphere, when black people articulate in practice and enact for the first time in print key principles of black counterpublicity: collective incorporation, conscious differentiation, and criticism of dominant political and economic interests." J. Brooks, "Early American Public Sphere," 75.

6. Martin, *Mind of Frederick Douglass*, esp. 55–106.

7. As Jeannine DeLombard has shown, Douglass's shift from a nearly exclusive focus on abolitionism to the broader arena of the antebellum Black public sphere can also be understood in terms of his wish to *advocate* through legal argumentation, not just to bear witness: "Douglass's own reassessment of his role in the antislavery movement . . . should prompt a corresponding reevaluation of the ongoing critical emphasis in African American studies and in the legal academy on black testimony's purportedly liberating quality." Douglass believed that "African American civic participation required a black advocacy that foregrounded forensic argumentation even as it retained the personal narrative of racial oppression." DeLombard, *Slavery on Trial*, 126.