

**MY BONDAGE
AND MY FREEDOM**

FREDERICK DOUGLASS

*With an Introduction and Notes
by Brent Hayes Edwards*

**GEORGE STADE
CONSULTING EDITORIAL DIRECTOR**



**BARNES & NOBLE CLASSICS
NEW YORK**

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Genealogical trees do not flourish among slaves. (page 40)

My poor mother, like many other slave-women, had *many children*, but NO FAMILY! (pages 49-50)

That plantation is a little nation of its own, having its own language, its own rules, regulations and customs. The laws and institutions of the state, apparently touch it nowhere. The troubles arising here are not settled by the civil power of the state. The overseer is generally accuser, judge, jury, advocator and executioner. The criminal is always dumb. The overseer attends to all sides of a case. (page 60)

Under the whole heavens there is no relation more unfavorable to the development of honorable character, than that sustained by the slaveholder to the slave. Reason is imprisoned here, and passion run wild. (page 72)

The slave is a subject, subjected by others; the slaveholder is a subject, but he is the author of his own subjection. There is more truth in the saying, that slavery is a greater evil to the master than to the slave, than many, who utter it, suppose. (page 89)

From my earliest recollections of serious matters, I date the entertainment of something like an ineffaceable conviction, that slavery would not always be able to hold me within its foul embrace; and this conviction, like a word of living faith, strengthened me through the darkest trials of my lot. (page 113)

Nature has done almost nothing to prepare men and women to be either slaves or slaveholders. (page 122)

How vividly, at that moment, did the brutalizing power of slavery flash before me! Personalities swallowed up in the sordid idea of property! Manhood lost in chattelhood! (page 138)

Make a man a slave, and you rob him of moral responsibility. Freedom of choice is the essence of accountability (page 149)

The over work, and the brutal chastisements of which I was the victim, combined with that ever gnawing and soul-devouring thought—“*I am a slave—aslave for life—aslave with no rational ground to hope for freedom*”—rendered me a living embodiment of mental and physical wretchedness. (page 150)

I had reached the point, at which I was *not afraid to die*. This spirit made me a freeman in *fact*, while I remained a slave in *form*. (page 187)

I longed to have *a future*—a future with hope in it. To be shut up entirely to the past and present, is abhorrent to the human mind; it is to the soul—whose life and happiness is unceasing progress—what the prison is to the body; a blight and mildew, a hell of horrors. The dawning of this, another year ago, awakened me from my temporary slumber, and roused into life my latent, but long cherished aspirations for freedom. (page 206)

To make a contented slave, you must make a thoughtless one. (page 238)

Toward fugitives, Americans are not honest. (page 256)

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. Nevertheless, he persevered. (page 292)

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FREDERICK DOUGLASS

Frederick Augustus Washington Bailey was born a slave in Tuckahoe, Maryland, in February 1818. He became a leading abolitionist and women's rights advocate and one of the most influential public speakers and writers of the nineteenth century.

Frederick's mother, Harriet Bailey, was a slave; his father was rumored to be Aaron Anthony, a manager for the large Lloyd plantation in St. Michaels, Maryland, and his mother's master. Frederick lived away from the plantation with his grandparents, Isaac and Betsey Bailey, until he was six years old, when he was sent to work for Anthony.

When Frederick was eight, he was sent to Baltimore as a houseboy for Hugh Auld, a shipbuilder related to the Anthony family through marriage. Auld's wife, Sophia, began teaching Frederick to read, but Auld, who believed that a literate slave was a dangerous slave, stopped the lessons. From that point on, Frederick viewed education and knowledge as a path to freedom. He continued teaching himself to read; in 1831 he bought a copy of *The Columbian Orator*, an anthology of great speeches which he studied closely.

In 1833 Frederick was sent from Auld's relatively peaceful home back to St. Michaels to work in the fields. He was soon hired out to Edward Covey, a notorious "slave-breaker" who beat him brutally in an effort to crush his will. However, on an August afternoon in 1834, Frederick stood up to Covey and beat him in a fight. This was a turning point, Douglass has said, in his life as a slave; the experience reawakened his desire and drive for liberty.

After a failed escape attempt, Frederick was sent back to Baltimore, where he again worked for Hugh Auld, this time as a ship caulker. In Baltimore he met and fell in love with Anna Murray, a free black woman.

In 1838 Frederick Bailey escaped from slavery by using the papers of a free seaman. He traveled north to New York City, where Anna Murray soon joined him. Later that year, Frederick and Anna married and moved to New Bedford, Massachusetts. Though settled in the North, Frederick was a fugitive, technically still Auld's property. To protect himself, he became Frederick Douglass, a name inspired by a character in Sir Walter Scott's poem *Lady of the Lake*.

Douglass began speaking against slavery at abolitionist meetings and soon gained a reputation as a brilliant orator. In 1841 he began working full-time as an abolitionist lecturer, touring with one of the leading activists of the day, William Lloyd Garrison.

Douglass published his first autobiography, *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, an American Slave*, in 1845. The book became an immediate sensation and was widely read both in America and abroad. Its publication, however, jeopardized his freedom by exposing his true identity. To avoid capture as a fugitive slave, Douglass spent the next several years touring and speaking in England and Ireland. In 1846 two friends purchased his freedom. Douglass returned to America, an internationally renowned abolitionist and orator.

Douglass addressed the first Women's Rights Convention in Seneca Falls, New York, in 1848. This began his long association with the women's rights movement, including friendships with such well-known suffragists as Susan B. Anthony and Elizabeth Cady Stanton.

During the mid-1840s Douglass began to break ideologically from William Lloyd Garrison. Whereas Garrison's abolitionist sentiments were based in moral exhortation, Douglass was coming to believe that change would occur through political means. He became increasingly involved in antislavery politics with the Liberty and Free-Soil Parties. In 1847 Douglass established and edited the politically oriented, antislavery newspaper the *North Star*.

During the Civil War, President Lincoln called upon Douglass to advise him on emancipation issues. In addition, Douglass worked hard to secure the right of blacks to enlist; when the Fifty-fourth Massachusetts Volunteers was established as the first black regiment, he traveled throughout the North recruiting volunteers.

Douglass's governmental involvement extended far beyond Lincoln's tenure. He was consulted by the next five presidents and served as secretary of the Santo Domingo Commission (1871), marshal of the District of Columbia (1877—1881), recorder of deeds for the District of Columbia (1881—1886), and minister to Haiti (1889—1891). A year before his death Douglass delivered an important speech, "The Lessons of the Hour," a denunciation of lynchings in the United States.

On February 20, 1895, Frederick Douglass died of a heart attack. His death triggered an outpouring of grief and mourning; black schools in Washington, D.C., closed for a day, and thousands of children were taken to the Metropolitan African Methodist Episcopal Church to view his open casket. In his third autobiography, Douglass succinctly and aptly summarized his life; writing that he had "lived several lives in one: first, the life of slavery; secondly, the life of a fugitive from slavery; thirdly, the life of comparative freedom; fourthly, the life of conflict and battle; and fifthly, the life of victory, not complete, at least assured."

THE WORLD OF FREDERICK DOUGLASS AND MY BONDAGE AND MY FREEDOM

- 1818** In February Frederick Douglass is born Frederick Augustus Washington Bailey in Tuckahoe Maryland. His mother, Harriet Bailey, is a slave; his father's identity is unknown, though many believe he was Douglass's white master, Aaron Anthony. Frederick is sent to be raised by his grandparents, Betsey and Isaac Bailey.
- 1824** Six-year-old Frederick is sent to St. Michaels, Maryland, to work on the Lloyd plantation, managed by Aaron Anthony.
- 1826** Frederick's mother dies. He is sent to Baltimore to work for Hugh Auld, a shipbuilder and the brother of Thomas Auld, Anthony's son-in-law. Frederick's job is to look after Auld's son, Tommy, and to work as a houseboy for Auld's wife, Sophia.
- 1827** Sophia Auld begins to teach Frederick to read, but her husband stops the lessons. Frederick continues learning on his own.
- 1831** Having saved fifty cents, he purchases a copy of *The Columbian Orator*, an anthology of great speeches from leading orators throughout history, on such issues as liberty, equality, and justice.
- 1833** In March Frederick is sent back to St. Michaels to work for Thomas Auld.
- 1834** In January he is hired out as a field hand to Edward Covey, a professional "slave-breaker" who beats intransigent slaves into submission. After nearly eight months, Frederick stands up to Covey and beats him in a fight.
- 1835** Frederick is hired out to William Freeland as a field hand. He opens a Sunday school for young blacks and begins teaching them to read and write.
- 1836** Frederick and several other of Covey's slaves attempt to escape, but are caught and imprisoned. Thomas Auld takes him out of prison and sends him back to Baltimore, where Hugh Auld trains him to become a ship caulker.
- 1837** He meets and falls in love with Anna Murray, a free black woman.
- 1838** On September 3 Frederick successfully escapes from slavery using a sailor's "protection papers" (documents certifying the bearer is a free seaman). He arrives in New York City on September 4 and, to avoid recapture, changes his name to Frederick Johnson. Anna Murray joins him in New York and they marry on September 15. They move to New Bedford, Massachusetts. Frederick again changes his name, this time to Frederick Douglass, after a character in *Lady of the Lake* (1810), a historical poem by Sir Walter Scott.
- In New Bedford Douglass works as a day laborer and begins speaking at abolitionist

1839 meetings. His first child, Rosetta, is born on June 24.

1840 The Douglass's son Lewis is born.

1841 In August Douglass travels to Nantucket to attend a meeting of the Massachusetts Anti-Slavery Society; he meets the abolitionist William Lloyd Garrison, president of the American Anti-Slavery Society and editor of the wellknown abolitionist paper *The Liberator*. Impressed by Douglass's eloquent and powerful speech, Garrison employs him as an antislavery speaker.

1842 A second son, Frederick, is born. Douglass begins traveling in New England, New York, and elsewhere around the North as an abolitionist speaker. He tells his personal story and attacks both slavery and northern racism. He and his family move to Lynn, Massachusetts, where Anna finds work in a shoe factory.

1844 Another son, Charles Remond, is born.

1845 In May Douglass publishes *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, an American Slave*. The book is well received and widely publicized. However, its publication exposes his identity, and fearing capture as a fugitive slave, he leaves the country. He begins traveling through England and Ireland, speaking against slavery.

1846 On December 5, 1846, friends purchase Douglass's freedom from Thomas Auld.

1847 Douglass returns to the United States in the spring; he and his family move to Rochester, New York. On December 3 he founds an antislavery newspaper, the *North Star*, which he continues to edit until 1860 (the paper's name becomes *Frederick Douglass' Paper* in 1851).

1848 Douglass attends and speaks at the first Women's Rights Convention in Seneca Falls, New York, beginning his long association with the women's rights movement.

1849 His daughter Annie is born.

1850 Douglass becomes part of the Underground Railroad network, using his home as a hiding place for fugitive slaves traveling north.

1851 Douglass definitively breaks with Garrison, disagreeing over the issue of moral exhortation (which Garrison favored) versus political action (Douglass's preference) as the major tool for eliminating slavery.

1852 On July 4 Douglass delivers an impassioned speech about the meaning of freedom and slavery in a republic and about continuing hypocrisy and injustice.

1855 His second autobiography, *My Bondage and My Freedom*, is published.

Abolitionist John Brown tries to enlist Douglass's support in a raid to liberate slaves at Harpers Ferry, Virginia (now West Virginia); Douglass refuses, believing it to be a doomed

- 1859** ef fort. On October 16 Brown goes through with his raid and is caught; he is later tried and hanged for treason. Because of his association with Brown, Douglass flees to England.
- 1860** Douglass's daughter Annie dies and he returns to Rochester. He campaigns for Abraham Lincoln, who is elected president in November.
- 1861** The Civil War begins. Douglass is a vocal proponent of the right of blacks to enlist and an aggressive propagandist for the Union cause.
- 1863** On January 1 President Abraham Lincoln issues the Emancipation Proclamation, freeing all slaves in Confederate areas not held by Union troops. The first black regiment, the Fiftyfourth Massachusetts Volunteers, is assembled. Two of Douglass's sons, Lewis and Charles, are among the recruits. Douglass travels throughout the North and recruits more than 100 members for the regiment; but he stops recruiting after a few months because of rampant discrimination against the black soldiers.
- 1864** Douglass is called to the White House to discuss strategies for emancipation.
- 1865** He attends the White House reception following Lincoln's second inauguration. The Civil War ends on April 9, and on April 14 Lincoln is assassinated. In December Congress ratifies the Thirteenth Amendment to the U.S. Constitution, abolishing slavery.
- 1866** Douglass supports Republican Reconstruction plans. He is part of a delegation that meets with President Andrew Johnson (who harbors Confederate sympathies) to push for black suffrage.
- 1868** Douglass campaigns for Ulysses S. Grant, who wins the presidency in 1868. On March 30, 1870, Congress passes the Fifteenth Amendment, which gives blacks the right to vote.
- 1870** Douglass's support for this measure, which does not include women, causes a temporary rift with women's rights supporters.
- 1871** Grant appoints Douglass secretary of a commission to Santo Domingo.
- 1872** The Douglass's Rochester home is destroyed by fire; no one is injured, but many of Douglass's important papers are lost. The family moves to Washington, D.C.
- 1874** Douglass is named president of Freedman's Savings and Trust Company, a bank that had been founded to encourage blacks to save and invest their money. The bank is on the verge of collapse when Douglass takes it over, and it soon closes. A newspaper Douglass had purchased in 1870—the *New National Era*—also closes.
- 1877** President Rutherford B. Hayes appoints Douglass marshal of the District of Columbia, a post he holds until 1881. Douglass returns to St. Michaels, Maryland, and meets with his former owner Auld, who is dying.
- 1881** President James Garfield appoints Douglass recorder of deeds for the District of Columbia, a post he holds until 1886. Douglass publishes his third autobiographical volume, *Life and Times of Frederick Douglass*.

1882 His wife, Anna, dies in August.

1884 Douglass causes something of a scandal when he marries his former secretary, Helen Pitts, who is white.

1889 President Benjamin Harrison appoints him minister and consul general to Haiti, a post he holds until 1891.

1894 Douglass delivers his last major speech, "The Lessons of the Hour," a denunciation of lynchings in the United States.

1895 On February 20 Frederick Douglass dies in Washington, D.C., of a heart attack. He is buried in Rochester beside his first wife and his daughter, Anna.

1988 On February 12 Douglass's home in Washington, D.C., is designated the Frederick Douglass National Historic Site.

INTRODUCTION

With the publication of *My Bondage and My Freedom* by the New York house of Miller, Orton, and Mulligan in August 1855, Frederick Douglass became the first African American to compose a second autobiography. His previous effort, *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, an American Slave*, had appeared only ten years earlier, and it had by no means faded from view. On the contrary, particularly given the celebrity Douglass had gained as an anti-slavery lecturer and newspaper editor during the intervening years, the *Narrative* had already taken its place as one of the best known of the few dozen narratives by former slaves printed in the decades leading up to the Civil War. With the “sheer poetry” of its taut style and the “unrelenting power of its narrative line,” Douglass’s 1845 book is often considered to have set the high water mark of literary composition for an entire generation of African American authors attempting to pen their life stories under the pressures of the abolitionist cause (Stepto, *From Behind the Veil*, p. 21; O’Meally, “Introduction” to *Narrative*, pp. xiv—xv; see also “For Further Reading”). The appearance of *My Bondage and My Freedom* would seem to beg the question, then: Why would Douglass have been compelled to write the story of his life again?

Interestingly enough, contemporary reviewers in the 1850s appear to have been little troubled by this question; they took *My Bondage and My Freedom* as the kind of autobiographical effort befitting a public figure of Douglass’s achieved stature: The second book, more than three times longer than the first, was read “more as a conventional account of the life of an unusual man than as an antislavery document” in the model of the *Narrative* (Blassingame, “Introduction to Volume Two,” in *The Frederick Douglass Papers*. Series 2, vol. 2, p. xxxi). Sales were robust, as they had been with the *Narrative*: reportedly *My Bondage and My Freedom* sold 5,000 copies in the first two days it was available (with a thousand copies purchased in its first week in the city of Syracuse alone). A second edition appeared in 1856 and a third in 1857; more than 20,000 copies had been sold by 1860, when the German translation of the book appeared. One might not expect such a success if the book were only a half-hearted rehashing of the *Narrative*. Nevertheless, as John Blassingame and others have pointed out, twentieth-century readers have often had the tendency to consider *My Bondage and My Freedom* as no more than a “propagandistic and didactic gloss on Douglass’s ‘real’ self-portrait, the *Narrative*” (p. xlii). Until recently, the few literary critics who took the time to discuss the book tended to dismiss it as “diffuse and attenuated,” a “flabby” sequel to the pristine and “righteous *Narrative*” (quoted in Andrews, *To Tell a Free Story*, pp. 266-267). At best, they have characterized the second book as though it were simply a second edition of the *Narrative*, an update taking into account Douglass’s activities between 1845 and 1855, as when Stephen Butterfield in his 1974 *Black Autobiography in America* opined blandly that *My Bondage and My Freedom* “includes most of the material from the early *Narrative*, with some rewriting, plus the experiences and development that occurred after 1845” (quoted in John David Smith’s “Introduction,” p. xxi).

In the past decade and a half, a handful of scholars such as William Andrews, Eric Sundquist, John Blassingame, John David Smith, and C. Peter Ripley have begun to draw our attention to the importance and independent accomplishment of *My Bondage and My Freedom*. In the words of Ripley, it is crucial to recognize that Douglass’s three autobiographies—the last, *Life and Times of Frederick Douglass*, was published in 1881 and revised and expanded in 1893—appeared “at distinct periods of Douglass’s life for different reasons” (p. 5). Andrews, whose work has made the mo-

forceful and sustained case for the significance of Douglass's second book, has wondered in pointed terms just why the *Narrative* is so habitually seen not just as prior but as privileged, even authoritative: "If the second autobiography can be seen as the successor of the first, why can't the *Narrative* be examined as the precursor of *My Bondage and My Freedom*?" (*To Tell a Free Story*, 267).

It is necessary to read the two books carefully, side by side, to begin to get a sense of exactly how different they are. Clearly, with its expanded length and its twenty-five chapters in the place of the *Narrative*'s eleven, the 1855 autobiography is "bigger, roomier, more detailed, and more expository than its predecessor (Andrews, "Introduction to the 1987 Edition," p. xvii). But more significantly, even given the parallels in narrative, argument, and phrasing, *My Bondage and My Freedom* is written from an entirely different vantage point—one might almost say that it is composed by an entirely different writer. If the second book contains a more mature style, it is directly related to what Douglass had been doing over the past decade: not just speaking against slavery, traveling the country, and raising subscriptions for abolitionist periodicals such as the *Liberator*, but also reading and writing—that is, giving himself a thorough training in literature and journalism, in a way that (for obvious reasons) he had never had the chance to do before composing the *Narrative*.

By the mid-1850s, Douglass was writing about a half-dozen editorials, articles, and reviews each week in various periodicals; he had published nearly a thousand editorials over the previous eight years, and had given almost the same number of speeches in a range of locales throughout the United States as well as in Canada, England, Scotland, and Ireland. After 1847, as a publisher and editor of his own newspaper, he kept up with the current papers, magazines, and journals, and his regular reading included not only the principal abolitionist venues but also mass-circulation periodicals such as the *North American Review*, *Harper's New Monthly*, the *London Quarterly Review*, and the *Atlantic Monthly*. Perhaps most significantly, Douglass had been able to educate himself in autobiography himself; he read extensively in contemporary examples of the genre (including works by writers such as Thomas De Quincey, Thomas Hart Benton, Robert Romain, and Sargent S. Prentiss) and reviewed a good number of the twenty-one slave narratives published between 1846 and 1855 (by authors including Solomon Northrup, William Wells Brown, Henry Bibb, Wilson Armistead, Austin Stewart, and James W. C. Pennington) (see Blassingame, pp. xxii-xxiii). In other words, *My Bondage and My Freedom* became necessary in part as a result of this extensive experience and exposure to a wide segment of the American literary scene.

In this respect, John Blassingame has argued convincingly that there is a wide "intellectual gulch" separating the twenty-seven-year-old orator and the thirty-seven-year-old writer and activist. Between 1845 and 1855, writing his editorials and reviews, Douglass had continually made recourse to his own memories of the South and of slavery. For Blassingame, this journalistic practice "became for him a way to systematically order, reconstruct, and recreate formative events and gave readers insight into his changing sense of self. As time passed, Douglass sensed that his first autobiography no longer provided the symmetry needed to balance his past and present in the 1850s. He published *Bondage and Freedom* to provide this new interpretation" (p. xxvi). In 1855 Douglass had a much clearer sense of the kind of autobiography he wanted to write, and a much broader expertise in the craft of writing to do it.

To approach the question from another angle, one might note that it was precisely the publication of the 1845 *Narrative* that propelled Douglass on the path that led to the composition of *My Bondage and My Freedom*—a trajectory that made the second text not a simple sequel, but instead "a quiet b

thorough revision of the significance of the life of Frederick Douglass” (Andrews, *To Tell a Fre Story*, p. 217). As Douglass himself explains in the second book, he originally wrote the *Narrative* to counter the virulent critics who denounced him as a fraud; in the early 1840s, many claimed that he was too articulate, too educated, too charismatic, to have ever been a slave. “In a little less than forty years, therefore, after becoming a public lecturer,” Douglass informs us, “I was induced to write of the leading facts connected with my experience in slavery, giving names of persons, places, and dates—thus putting it in the power of any who doubted, to ascertain the truth or falsehood of my story of being a fugitive slave” (p. 270). But the *Narrative*, if it quelled the suspicions of some doubters, also brought increased danger for Douglass; it was not uncommon for escaped slaves in the North to be “recaptured” and returned to their masters. With an irony that was to become characteristic, Douglass explains that the publication of the *Narrative*, that great tale of an escape from slavery, actually “endangered my liberty” and “led me to seek a refuge from republican slavery in monarchic England” (p. 272). Over twenty-one months between 1845 and 1847, Douglass undertook a triumphant speaking tour in England, Ireland, Scotland, and Wales that increased his international fame beyond his wildest imaginings.

Like most of the black intellectuals and fugitive slaves who spent time in Europe during the period, Douglass was impressed by the relative absence of racism there. In the title of the *Narrative*, Douglass qualifies his name with the phrase, “an American Slave,” and forcefully claims the principles of American democracy as rightfully his own inheritance. Likewise in the introduction to *My Bondage and My Freedom*, James McCune Smith contends that Douglass is “a Representative American man” having “passed through every gradation of rank comprised in our national make-up” (pp. 29—30). For Smith, the book is above all “an American book, for Americans, in the fullest sense of the idea” (pp. 35—36). Yet in the text of *My Bondage and My Freedom*, Douglass grows increasingly critical of American pretenses and American hypocrisy, especially in chapter 5, on his voyage to Europe, and in the appendix, which includes extracts from his magisterial 1852 speech “What to the Slave Is the Fourth of July?” (pp. 340—344). As he makes clear, it is his experience of “semi-exile” (as he terms it) that first drives him to question a number of his assumptions about racial identity and national belonging (pp. 283, 291). In a scathing January 1846 letter to his mentor William Lloyd Garrison reproduced in full in the book, Douglass states baldly: “I have no end to serve, no creed to uphold, no government to defend; and as to nation, I belong to none. I have no protection at home, or resting place abroad” (p. 274). As Eric Sundquist has pointed out, there is a deep and rich “dissonance” in Douglass’s work—perhaps more evident in *My Bondage and My Freedom* than in any other of his writings—between his claiming of the revolutionary, democratic legacy of the American founding fathers in its most robust sense, and his unmasking of the perversity that allows slavery to flourish in the very midst of that legacy of liberation (Sundquist, *To Wake the Nations*, pp. 127-128).

The letter to Garrison is notable not just for its rhetorical power but also for the way that it contrasts the paucity of color prejudice in England with instances of discrimination in the United States. But the examples (all punctuated with the lacerating refrain, “*We don’t allow niggers in here*”) are taken neither from slavery nor from the South. Douglass is refused entry to a menagerie in the Boston Common; he is ejected from a religious revival meeting in New Bedford, Massachusetts; he is informed that he cannot attend an event at the Lyceum (a public lecture hall); on a cold, wet night traveling by steamship up the East Coast, he is thrown out of the ship’s cabin, which he had entered seeking shelter; he is denied service by a restaurant in Boston; he is told by a driver in “fiendish tones that he will not be allowed to ride a carriage—these instances all enumerate the prevalence

racism in the North. Douglass goes on to tell Garrison that he had dined with the lord mayor of Dublin, and comments sarcastically:

What a pity there was not some American democratic christian at the door of his splendid mansion, to bark out at my approach, ‘*They don’t allow niggers in here!*’ The truth is, the people here know nothing of the republican negro hate prevalent in our glorious land. They measure an esteem men according to their moral and intellectual worth, and not according to the color of their skin. Whatever may be said of the aristocracies here, there is none based on the color of man’s skin. This species of aristocracy belongs preëminently to ‘the land of the free, and the home of the brave.’ I have never found it abroad, in any but Americans. It sticks to them wherever they go. They find it almost as hard to get rid of, as to get rid of their skins (p. 278).

My Bondage and my Freedom, in other words, is critical of racism not just as the cornerstone of the “peculiar institution” of southern slavery, but more disturbingly as a central characteristic of the American “democratic” temperament in general. Color prejudice has nothing to do with melanin with innate capacities, and everything to do with a “species of aristocracy” infecting white Americans as unshakable as their own hides. The title of the second section of the book, “Life as a Freeman” (p. 249), takes on a certain edge, as Douglass underlines that the condition of the “free” black in the North is far from being some sort of unqualified, absolute deliverance. Toward the end of the text, he reminds us that a major “thread” running throughout the book is “American prejudice against color and its varied illustrations in my own experience” (p. 295). He adds, perhaps most daringly, that even white northern abolitionists, his friends and supporters during the previous decade and a half, “themselves were not entirely free from it” (p. 295). As he put it in an editorial in the spring of 1851, African Americans must rescue “our whole race, from every species of oppression, irrespective of the form it may assume, or the source whence it may emanate” (quoted in Andrews, *To Tell a Free Story*, p. 217).

In the wake of this shift in his sense of the nature of American prejudice, Douglass decided to found a newspaper upon his return to the United States. In his view, “a tolerably well conducted press” run by African Americans would be an invaluable “means of removing prejudice” and “chang[ing] the estimation in which the colored people of the United States were held.” A vibrant periodical, more than any other institution, would assist in the struggle “by calling out the mental energies of the race itself; by making them acquainted with their own latent powers; by enkindling among them the hope that for them there is a future; by developing their moral power; by combining and reflecting the talents” (p. 289). In the spring of 1847, he came back with approximately \$2,500 that abolitionist allies in England had raised to support his endeavor. Of course, it was this decision that led to Douglass’s first difficulties with his “Boston friends,” the circle of abolitionists linked to William Lloyd Garrison and the American Anti-Slavery Society. Douglass was surprised to encounter the vehement objection to his plan to start a paper, and their barrage of opposition almost convinced him to “abandon the enterprise”: they told him that “first, the paper was not needed; secondly, it would interfere with my usefulness as a lecturer; thirdly, I was better fitted to speak than to write; fourthly, the paper could not succeed” (p. 292). In the end, Douglass persevered, moving to Rochester, New York, to found his periodical in the fall of 1847. The *North Star* (later renamed *Frederick Douglass Paper*) was successful by any measure: even after Garrison conspired to have the Anti-Slavery Society withdraw its funding in 1851, Douglass’s paper grew in circulation and influence, and was the longest continually published black newspaper before the Civil War.

We should not forget that what Douglass terms the “development of my own mental and moral

energies” (p. 293) was closely linked to his work on the paper. It became a key part of his identity; by the 1850s, asked how he wished to be addressed publicly, Douglass was known to respond, “Mr. Editor, if you please” (quoted by Sekora, p. 614). The attendant responsibilities forced Douglass to become conversant in the political debates of the day, with the result that he rethought many of his positions. He eventually came to disagree with Garrison’s call for “disunion” (the notion that non-slaveholding states should dissolve their federation with the slave states of the South), and with his position that abolitionists should refrain from voting. Douglass declared on the contrary that not voting would be “to refuse to exercise a legitimate and powerful means for abolishing slavery,” since the Constitution of the United States was the supreme “anti-slavery instrument” (p. 294). In *My Bondage and My Freedom*, Douglass tells us that “but for the responsibility of conducting a public journal, and the necessity imposed upon me of meeting opposite views from abolitionists in this state, I should in all probability have remained as firm in my disunion views as any other disciple of William Lloyd Garrison” (p. 294).

Biographer Benjamin Quarles notes that Douglass’s “editorship expanded the scope of his abilities. He acquired the sense of authority that goes with the power to hire and discharge. He grew familiar with the economics of journalism and learned the mysteries of debit and credit” (*Frederick Douglass*, p. 96). More significantly, running the paper expanded the scope of Douglass’s political alliances, and placed him in contact with the period’s leading black intellectuals and activists, many of whom were opposed to Garrison’s vision of anti-slavery strategy. The *North Star* was initially co-edited by Douglass and the talented black nationalist and novelist Martin R. Delany, and its contributors included many of the most savvy African-American political figures of the day, including James McCune Smith (who sent a regular column from his home in New York City), William J. Wilson (based in Brooklyn), and Samuel Ringgold Ward (who sent articles from Canada) (see Quarles, p. 85). There was a concomitant broadening of Douglass’s political concerns, as he moved beyond the abolitionist cause to take up other issues—such as voting rights, feminism, vocational training, emigration, and colonization—affecting not just his “brethren in bonds” (as he phrased it in the last lines of the appendix to the *Narrative*) but also the free black community. As Douglass explains in *My Bondage and My Freedom*: “Since I have been editing and publishing a journal devoted to the cause of liberty and progress, I have had my mind more directed to the condition and circumstances of the free colored people than when I was the agent of an abolition society” (p. 300). In this period, James McCune Smith went so far as to exclaim that “only since his Editorial career has he seen to become a colored man! I have read his paper very carefully and find phase after phase develop itself as in our newly born among us” (quoted in Sekora, p. 614). Another black journal, *The Rising Sun*, concluded emphatically that “Frederick Douglass’ ability as an editor and publisher has done more for the freedom and elevation of his race than all his platform appearances” (quoted in Sundquist, p. 104). As Smith puts it in his admiring introduction to *My Bondage and My Freedom*, Douglass “raised himself by his own efforts to the highest position in society. As a successful editor, in our land, he occupies this position. Our editors rule the land, and he is one of them” (p. 29).

Readers have long noted the oratorical qualities of the *Narrative*. It has been described as a “political sermon” and even as “something of a memorized lecture performance transferred to paper” (Andrews, *To Tell a Free Story*, p. 126; Sundquist, p. 89). If Douglass’s first book is the story of “how a slave was made a man,” it is equally the story of how a man was made a public speaker. The book concludes not with his escape from slavery but instead with a sort of vocational epiphany, as Douglass is “moved” to speak in an anti-slavery meeting in Nantucket, Massachusetts, in the summer of 1841.

Here is the passage that concludes the book:

I had not long been a reader of the “Liberator,” before I got a pretty correct idea of the principles, measures and spirit of the anti-slavery reform. I took right hold of the cause. I could do but little; but what I could, I did with a joyful heart, and never felt happier than when in an anti-slavery meeting. I seldom had much to say at the meetings, because what I wanted to say was said so much better by others. But, while attending an anti-slavery convention at Nantucket on the 11th of August, 1841, I felt strongly moved to speak, and was at the same time much urged to do so by Mr. William C. Coffin, a gentleman who had heard me speak in the colored people’s meeting at New Bedford. It was a severe cross, and I took it up reluctantly. The truth was, I felt myself a slave, and the idea of speaking to white people weighed me down. I spoke but a few moments, when I felt a degree of freedom, and said what I desired with considerable ease. From that time until now, I have been engaged in pleading the cause of my brethren—with what success, and with what devotion, I leave those acquainted with my labors to decide
(*Narrative*, edited by O’Meally, p. 99).

One might add that this self-discovery (under the shadow of the *Liberator*) is also the story of the making of a Garrisonian. As William Andrews has pointed out, William Lloyd Garrison frames the *Narrative*, not just by writing its preface and “authenticating” the validity of Douglass’s story, but more generally in the way Garrison is positioned as “a crucial parameter in the text that dictated in an inevitably restrictive way the range of Douglass’s thinking about some key questions” (*To Tell a Free Story*, p. 217).

My Bondage and My Freedom tells a very different sort of tale. First of all, Douglass locates the origins of his oratorical skills much earlier, during discussions with his fellow slaves on Mr. Freeland’s farm in early 1836. “All my little reading, which had any bearing on the subject of human rights,” Douglass writes, “was rendered available in my communications with my friends,” as he strives to convince them to attempt an escape from slavery (p. 207). The anthology he had bought in Baltimore, *The Columbian Orator*, “with its eloquent orations and spicy dialogues, denouncing oppression and slavery—telling of what had been dared, done and suffered by men, to obtain the inestimable boon of liberty—was still fresh in my memory, and whirled into the ranks of my speech with the aptitude of well trained soldiers, going through the drill. The fact is, I here began my public speaking” (p. 207). As a result, Douglass’s intervention at the Nantucket anti-slavery convention five years later seems less a spontaneous epiphany—the sudden revelation of a great orator—and more the culmination of a long career of study and argument Douglass had pursued even while a slave.

Furthermore, in the second book Douglass radically downplays the importance (and the “ease”) of his moment of inspiration at the anti-slavery convention—he makes it seem less the anointing of a spokesman or the messianic assumption of a “severe cross” of leadership. The passage describing the event in *My Bondage and My Freedom* is much more hesitant and self-deprecating than the scene in the *Narrative*. Singled out in the crowd by Coffin, Douglass was induced to speak out the feelings inspired by the occasion, and the fresh recollection of the scenes through which I had passed as a slave. My speech on this occasion is about the only one I ever made, of which I do not remember a single connected sentence. It was with the utmost difficulty that I could stand erect, or that I could command and articulate two words without hesitation and stammering. I trembled in every limb. I am not sure that my embarrassment was not the most effective part of my speech, if speech it could be called. At any rate, this is about the only part of my performance that I now distinctly remember (pp. 266-267).

This passage is followed by Douglass's description of the way that, immediately after his fumbling "excited" performance, William Lloyd Garrison got up to deliver an impassioned, extemporaneous speech, "taking me as his text."

In the second book, then, Douglass's "hesitation and stammering" is but the prelude to a memorable speech by Garrison. The meaning of the event is thereby drastically altered. The moment of speaking is no longer the moment when Douglass discovers a "degree of freedom," but now the moment when he is taken as someone else's "text." This structure sets the tone of the entire chapter in *My Bondage and My Freedom* devoted to Douglass's career as an abolitionist lecturer. Over and over again, he points out the ways that Garrison and others treat him as an example, as a living document of slavery, but never as an emerging intellectual in his own right, with his own, shifting opinions and his own hunger for knowledge. During his years as an agent of the Anti-Slavery Society, when Douglass gave public lectures he was

generally introduced as a *chattel*—a "thing"—a piece of southern "property"—the chairman assuring the audience that it could speak. Fugitive slaves, at that time, were not so plentiful now; and as a fugitive slave lecturer, I had the advantage of being a "brand new fact"—the first one out.... During the first three or four months, my speeches were almost exclusively made up of narrations of my own personal experience as a slave. "Let us have the facts," said the people. "Give us the facts," said Collins, "we will take care of the philosophy." Just here arose some embarrassment.... It did not entirely satisfy me to *narrate* wrongs; I felt like *denouncing* them (pp. 268-269).

This instrumental relationship is echoed in the very form of the *Narrative*, where Garrison's preface is poised to offer the "philosophy" to Douglass's "facts." Garrison assures the reader that Douglass's tale is "essentially true in all its statements," with "nothing drawn from the imagination"; his career "may be regarded as a very fair specimen of the treatment of slaves in Maryland" (*Narrative*, p. 7, 8). The *Narrative* is marked by a "tension," as the scholar Robert Stepto has pointed out, between the patronizing, fact-finding tone in Garrison's preface, on the one hand, and Douglass's unprecedented professions of autonomy in the text itself, on the other (Stepto, p. 18). Douglass insists that "I prefer to be true to myself" rather than to temper his words to the expectations of white readers (*Narrative*, p. 39; see also Andrews, *To Tell a Free Story*, p. 103).

In *My Bondage and My Freedom*, Douglass tells us how he was taken as a "text" by the abolitionists and in doing so he leaves that relationship behind. The second book, and its account of the break with Garrison, is an announcement that Frederick Douglass will no longer be anyone's "brand new fact." It is altogether accurate, then, that biographer William McFeely has described *My Bondage and My Freedom* as "its author's declaration of independence" (*Frederick Douglass*, p. 181). Although Garrison was incensed at what he perceived to be a stinging betrayal, in fact his former protégé's "declaration" is less polemic than one might expect. Describing his work with the Anti-Slavery Society, Douglass writes rather generously that his abolitionist "friends were actuated by the best motives, and were not altogether wrong in their advice; and still I must speak just the word that seemed to me the word to be spoken by me" (p. 269). In *My Bondage and My Freedom*, it is left to James McCune Smith's introduction to highlight the implicit parallels the book constructs between different kinds of "bondage," different kinds of "freedom," in the North as well as the South: Smith reminds us pointedly that "the same strong self hood" that allowed Douglass "to measure strength

with Mr. Covey” also allowed him “to wrench himself from the embrace of the Garrisonians” (p. 35).

One way to describe the difference between the two books is to suggest that if the *Narrative* is the story of the making of a public speaker, *My Bondage and My Freedom* is the story of the making of an editor. This point is made not only by the historical trajectory I have outlined, but also in the form of the second book itself. On the one hand, there is an editorial revision and elaboration of passages in the *Narrative*, marked by what William Andrews terms a strategy of “novelization”: a departure from the blunt, documentary style of the 1845 book with techniques drawn from the writing of fiction (particularly in the use of reconstructed dialogue and the increased turn to reflective and humorous digressions) (*To Tell a Free Story*, p. 271). The effect of this strategy is reflected in reviews of the book in the 1850s, which continually laud its “literary merit,” describing it as “more enthralling than any fictional account of slavery” and “more exciting” than any “romance” (quoted in Blassingame, xxxii). On the other hand, there is an editorial quality in the arrangement of the book, involving elements such as the proliferation of chapter titles and subheadings, and the illustrations preceding each of the book’s two sections. The appendix is another case in point. Whereas the appendix to the *Narrative* is a critique written by Douglass of the hypocrisy of “religious” slaveowners, in *My Bondage and My Freedom* this material is refashioned and integrated into chapter XVIII (pp. 189-203) and the book’s appendix is instead a sampling of extracts from Douglass’s speeches between 1846 and 1855. In other words, the 1845 book transcribes the oratorical Douglass, while the 1855 book edits and anthologizes his speaking career *as a part of his writing*.

Another editorial gesture is the extensive use of self-quotation in *My Bondage and My Freedom*. On four occasions, the book quotes extended passages from the *Narrative*: the well-known discussion of the power of the slave songs (p. 85); the moving evocation of Douglass’s grandmother’s old age and demise (pp. 141-142); the powerful depiction of Douglass watching the “moving multitude of ships” on the Chesapeake Bay (pp. 141—142); and the vivid, polyvocal scene of men working in the Baltimore shipyard (pp. 168—169). From one perspective, this practice of quoting might seem puzzling, given that there are a number of other passages where Douglass takes language whole-cloth from the earlier book without feeling the need to give a citation. But as Robert Levine has explained, the gesture is evidence of the degree to which Douglass considered the two books to be separate works: “when he conceives of his earlier version as particularly apt in its phrasings—which he does only a handful of times—he quotes from *Narrative* rather than revise” (*Martin Delany, Frederick Douglass, and the Politics of Representative Identity*, p. 268, note 29). Another scholar, Eric Sundquist, adds usefully that quotation represents a process of “textual objectification,” a mode of claiming the *Narrative* as Douglass’s own “property” to employ and remake as he sees fit. Thus Douglass’s practice of “detaching himself in successive ‘quotations’ from the objectified selves of his past” is “an act of revision—more specifically an act of revolt against the constraining authority of slavery, the radical wing of abolitionism, and the racism that Douglass fervently believed could be separated from the idea of democratic equality” (*To Wake the Nations*, p. 92).

It is worth spending a bit of time investigating Douglass’s process of revision in *My Bondage and My Freedom*, looking at the types of things he changed or added or removed—and why. It is only by doing so that one gets a full sense of the originality of the book, and of Douglass’s extraordinary abilities as a writer. At many points, revision of material from the *Narrative* means a relatively straightforward, albeit subtle, attempt at clarification or felicity in phrasing. In the seventh chapter of the *Narrative*, the young Douglass is determined to learn to read, and enlists his white playmates to teach him the rudiments of the alphabet and spelling. He begins to study the Bible and the single book

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