

Chapter 1

Frederick Douglass's Political Apostasy

A Return to Douglass

The majority of the citizens of the United States, since the end of the civil rights movement and the popularization of the idea of color blindness, have publicly espoused the desire to live in a society without race. What a “color-blind society” means varies among its proponents, but generally it includes the desiderata that the concept, the idea, of race be completely exposed as a tragic illusion and be expunged from our public and private vocabularies, that people will no longer be sorted into racial categories, and that racial divisiveness and inequities cease. This desire for a color-blind society has been recently demonstrated through the widespread unpopularity of color-conscious social programs, affirmative action being the epitome of those, and the equally widespread popularity of initiatives, such as in Texas, California, and Michigan, designed to bring an end to those programs.¹

Frederick Douglass (1817–1895) has long been the icon of color blindness and a raceless society, but largely for the political Left. Recently, he has been adopted by the political Right and cited in support of anti-affirmative action arguments. He has been held up as a figure that reflects the anti-racialist and individualist values of the neoliberal wing of the Republican Party. His iconic status is due to his role in the abolition movement, the international appeal of his autobiographies, and the breadth of his career that brought him national and international renown. As a leading black activist and journalist

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of the late nineteenth century, he was widely acknowledged as the de facto leader of the black community, and as such he presented a vision of a raceless nation that, though controversial and flawed, has continued to attract support.

In his multiple capacities he argued that the long-term solution to racial division in the United States, known then as the “race problem,” or tellingly as the “Negro problem,” was the end of racial separation through assimilation and amalgamation. He held that newly emancipated black Americans should assimilate into Anglo-American society and culture. Social assimilation would then lead to the entire physical amalgamation of the two groups and the emergence of a new intermediate group that would be fully American. He was driven by a vision of universal human fraternity in light of which the varieties of human difference were incidental and far less important than the ethical, religious, and political idea of personhood.

His vision of human brotherhood and his policy of assimilation and amalgamation have made him amenable to appropriation by a broad range of anti-racialists. Douglass’s arguments against color consciousness are repeated and his vision of a raceless nation is referenced although, and unfortunately, his place in the historic and national debate over race is not always acknowledged. Such ignorance of Douglass in conversations about race, as well as the rich tradition of thought about race and ethnicity in the United States—located in African American, Native American, Asian American, and Latino arts and letters—is a gross error. Just as those who argue that race ought to be conserved turn to the figure of W. E. B. Du Bois (1868–1963), those who disagree with the conservation of race stand in a historical relationship to Douglass. Douglass serves as a landmark in this debate, and appropriately he will be the starting point in this examination of the longing for the end of race.

In the following pages Douglass’s religious and political ideals, his conception of race, and his dual policy of assimilation and amalgamation are critiqued. Further, the relation of anti-racialist positions to Douglass’s legacy is discussed. Through this return to Douglass I expose erroneous appropriations of his legacy by conservative figures in the anti-racialist cause, and I argue that prominent anti-racialist theories, especially in philosophy, reiterate not only Douglass’s vision of human brotherhood but his fatal errors as well. This return to Douglass examines, and affirms, his compelling anti-racial social vision, yet it also unearths the deep disquietudes of his legacy and thus those that linger in the social visions of his heirs.

Before but between Du Bois and Washington

Along with the history of references to Douglass in discussions about race in the United States there has been contention over his image and the interpretation of his legacy.² W. E. B. Du Bois's elegiac poem *The Passing of Douglass* and his analysis of Douglass's role in the movement for black emancipation and enfranchisement of the late nineteenth century in *The Souls of Black Folk*, *John Brown*, and *Black Reconstruction in America* forward an image of Douglass as the leader of an activist community that sought liberty and inclusion primarily through self-assertion:

Here, led by Redmond, Nell, Wells-Brown, and Douglass, a new period of self-assertion and self-development dawned. To be sure, ultimate freedom and assimilation was the ideal before the leaders, but the assertion of the manhood rights of the Negro by himself was the main reliance, and John Brown's raid was the extreme of its logic. After the war and emancipation, the great form of Frederick Douglass, the greatest of American Negro leaders, still led the host.³

Du Bois's review of Douglass strikes the note of self-assertion and raises the militant specter of John Brown's raid on Harper's Ferry, Virginia. Douglass was close to Brown, supported Brown's plan to create an armed passageway from the South to Canada for escaping slaves, and even humored Brown's dream of creating a free black state in the Appalachian Mountains. Brown personally invited Douglass to join the raid on Harper's Ferry, and although Douglass turned down the invitation, and had to flee the country because of his complicity, he, along with the abolition movement, reveled in Brown's martyrdom and ex post facto gave the insurrection unconditional support. Despite Douglass's reticence to join the raid, his rhetoric of "manly" struggle against prejudice and slavery was consistent with the spirit of the insurrection. Brown's raid repeated the founding violence of the American Revolution, sought to extend the revolutionary ideals of the Declaration of Independence, and signified the divine retributive violence that Douglass, and many others, prophesied would befall the United States if it remained an unrepentant slave state.

Du Bois was correct to draw a direct line between Douglass's fierce rhetoric and ideas to Brown's raid—an event that anticipated the coming Civil War, which Douglass also supported.⁴ Du Bois firmly

places Douglass and himself as uncompromising partisans of full black citizenship and self-respect, values that Booker T. Washington's rhetoric and compromises undermine. Du Bois, however, disagreed with Douglass's policy of assimilation and amalgamation. Instead, Du Bois argued in *The Souls of Black Folk*, and more fully in the earlier "The Conservation of Races," that the races ought to be conserved and the black race, through racial organization, uplifted.⁵

Booker T. Washington's (1856–1915) *The Life of Frederick Douglass* presents an image of Douglass that is contrary to Du Bois's, and through his analysis he gives indirect responses to Du Bois's criticisms. Washington accurately points out parallels between himself and Douglass: they shared the experience of slavery, understood the North's complicity in slavery and the continuation of racism, and valued industrial education.⁶ In large part, though, his biography of Douglass is pedestrian and merely repeats the main story lines of Douglass's autobiographies.

Washington's writing becomes interesting, and his intent clear, in the sections where he interprets and appropriates Douglass's legacy. Washington argued that Douglass's nativity and experience as a slave in the South supported his legitimacy as a national black leader. Of course, he was making a point about his own political legitimacy, for he shared Douglass's origins. Likewise, his accusation that Douglass's critics were driven by envy rather than concern for black Americans is less an element of biography and more about his troubles with Du Bois.⁷

Beyond these self-serving associations, though, Washington's depiction of the personality, and his analysis of the policies, of Douglass directly contradicted the image of the militantly self-assertive and self-determined Douglass. Although Washington made much of the fact that Douglass was "self-made," because it fit well with his support of industrial education, he argued that Douglass's militancy was ephemeral and due to the bad influence of John Brown. Indeed, Washington distanced Douglass from what he called the "Harper's Ferry tragedy." Further, he distanced Douglass from Brown's vision and goal: that human equality before God ought to be actualized in society and the law. Washington, ignoring every word and action of Douglass's, claimed that Douglass, like himself, advocated for economic freedom but disavowed social equality.⁸ In short, Washington, contra Du Bois, placed Douglass as the ancestor of his politics of black accommodation to white demands for segregation and superiority for the sake of some promise of economic independence.

Washington's treatment of Douglass does not take up the issue of the conservation of race, because to do so would mean to discuss

amalgamation, and any mention of that would contradict his revision of Douglass's legacy. Nothing goes to the heart of this controversy quicker than interracial friendship, love, and sex, and Douglass certainly enjoyed all three and wished the rest of the nation would too. Washington's contemporary ideological progenies, however, do not shy away from the controversy over the conservation of race. In their fight for the end of race-based social programs there is a coalescence of Douglass's theory of social assimilation and Washington's theory of economic and industrial assimilation. Nonetheless, these anti-racialist conservatives, such as Clarence Thomas, Ward Connerly, and George Will, do demur, as did Washington, from the topic of amalgamation in white family lines, although they are quite happy to remark, as was Washington, that African Americans are not really or purely black.⁹

The Party of Douglass

The Republican Party, eager to reclaim its identity as the Party of Lincoln, is quick to reference Frederick Douglass's association with it. In contrast, though, with the radical and abolitionist wing of Douglass's party, the neoconservative Republicans who evoke Douglass's name are the ideological descendents of the Blue Dog Democrats of the Old South. The comments of these Republicans do uncover some interesting parallels, however, their comments are largely borne of political opportunism and simplify Douglass's long life engaged in mighty struggle against slavery, racism, and black disenfranchisement.

The erstwhile party of Lincoln's references to Douglass's legacy reached its climax on May 9, 2003, when the congressional Republican leadership pledged funding to complete the restoration of Cedar Hill, the Frederick Douglass National Historical Site in Washington, D.C. Representative Dennis Hastert of Illinois and Speaker of the House, and Senator Bill Frist, senator from Tennessee and majority leader, led the event. Representative Hastert's speech did not address the contradiction between this event and the Republican Party's recent history opposing or slowing down civil rights reforms, affirmative action, and other policies aimed at eliminating racial inequality, and its dependence on the racial fears and resentments of white folks. Instead, Hastert said:

As one of America's first Republicans, Frederick Douglass worked with President Abraham Lincoln to abolish slavery. While Mr. Lincoln is known as "the father of the Republican

Party," Mr. Douglass is internationally recognized as "the father of the civil rights movement." Frederick Douglass pledged his life's work to fight for justice and equal opportunity. He fought for women's rights; he fought for civil rights; he fought for human rights. The values and principles that Frederick Douglass and Abraham Lincoln worked so hard for in the 1800s are the same values and principles that we are fighting for as a Republican Party today. . . . We are proud to be here today to help fulfill America's promise with an agenda to empower African Americans to achieve the American Dream. As Frederick Douglass remarked in the late 1800s on his lifetime of achievements: "What is possible for me is possible for you." His life of honor, respect, and success is a testament that each of us can make the United States of America a better place for ourselves, our children, and our grandchildren.¹⁰

Speaker Hastert, in the passage just quoted, presents a sanitized summation of Douglass's legacy and a juvenile reduction of Douglass's principles; his speech then culminates with a tired neoconservative cliché. All the same, Speaker Hastert's words are consistent with the tone Douglass struck in many of his speeches. Douglass, as Washington noted, made frequent use of self-made-man rhetoric. His 1860 speech "The Trials and Triumphs of Self-Made Men" is an example of that rhetoric, and, of course, the language of "manly independence" is used in the 1865 speech "What the Black Man Wants." What Speaker Hastert left out, however, was Douglass's fierce criticisms of Lincoln and the slow realization that ascendancy of racial prejudice, Jim Crow, the Lynch Law, the enervation of the Bureau of Refugees, Freedmen, and Abandoned Lands, and the betrayal of the goals of the Reconstruction by the Republican Party meant that, to paraphrase his words, the emancipation was a stupendous fraud.¹¹

Justice Clarence Thomas, in his dissent from the majority opinion in *Grutter v. Bollinger*, made use of Douglass's "What the Black Man Wants" as part of his argument that the use of race in law school admission violates the equal protection clause of the constitution. Justice Thomas, to bolster his argument and to stress that "blacks can achieve in every avenue of American life without the meddling of university administrators," cited Douglass's assertion that the only thing the black man wants is justice and to be left alone.¹²

During Reconstruction and the years that followed, Douglass too easily brushed aside or underestimated the social and institutional obstacles to African Americans and indulged in "self-made man" clichés.

Booker T. Washington, in his biography of Douglass, made much of these assertions, and, at least on the surface of things, there are strong ties between Douglass's rhetoric and the policy positions of current black neoconservatives and libertarians. However, Douglass's position on what African Americans needed ran deeper than those clichés.¹³

After his break with Garrison, Douglass called upon the Union to "meddle" for the interests of black Americans. He outright demanded that the U.S. government end slavery in the South, that it should meddle with the "property rights" of the South, that it should allow runaway slaves their freedom, celebrated the meddling of John Brown, advocated that the abolition movement *not* disband after the Civil War—so that it could again meddle in the affairs of states with newly emancipated blacks—that women and blacks be given the right to vote, and that the federal government force states to end lynching.

Further, and more to the point, Douglass was a faithful defender of the Bureau of Refugees, Freedmen, and Abandoned Lands. The Freedmen's Bureau, as it was called, was commissioned to care for emancipated slaves, and as such it was a massive and positive government undertaking. Douglass knew that the Fourteenth Amendment, and its promise of equal protection, could only be ensured if "special efforts" were used to "guard" and "advance" the interests of African Americans "as a class."¹⁴ Indeed, he was in favor of direct federal assistance in the form of land, capital, and jobs for the freed. Douglass's remarks that the black man be left alone were not aimed at stopping federal intervention. He wanted quite the contrary; his comments were aimed at the efforts of Christian charities to help emancipated black Americans. Douglass believed that their charitable provision of such things as all-black schools encouraged segregation and detracted from the black demand for equal citizenship.¹⁵

Beyond Thomas's claim about meddling, though, he also argued that the majority was mistaken in its judgment that "student body diversity is a compelling state interest" and seemed to imply agreement with Douglass on this point. Douglass, however, in 1872, supported federal intervention for the integration of schools in the District of Columbia and throughout the South¹⁶:

Throughout the South all the schools should be mixed. From our observations during a trip to the South we are convinced that the interests of the poor whites and the colored people are identical. . . . In that section everything that will bring the poor white man and the colored man together should be done; they should be taught to make common cause against the rich land-holders of the South who never regarded a

poor white man of as much importance as they did slaves. Educate the poor white children and the colored children together; let them grow up to know that color makes no difference as to the rights of a man; that both the black man and the white man are at home; that the country is as much the country of one as of the other, and that both together must make it a valuable country.¹⁷

Thomas's claim, then, that Douglass would be an enemy of affirmative action, is unsupportable conjecture, and his claim that Douglass was opposed to federal meddling on behalf of African Americans is absolutely wrong, especially given his recognition that race needed to be used for political ends, and his reiterated condemnation of the United States, and the Republican Party, for failing to live up to its own principles.¹⁸ Thomas, like Washington, for his own ends, ignored the meaning of Douglass's words and actions. Although Speaker Hastert and Justice Thomas are not wrong to see concordance between their conservative positions and Douglass's writings, they demonstrate an embarrassingly puerile understanding of his legacy. Absent from their appropriations of Douglass are his ceaseless criticisms of anti-black personal and institutional racism, his advocacy of resistance of all sorts, including violent insurrection against slaveholders, his laments over this nation's repeated failures to deliver racial justice, his prophecy of racial amalgamation, and his "scorching irony" that blasted the hypocrisy and failure of U.S. Republicanism and Christianity.¹⁹

The inclusion of an awareness of Douglass's complexities would have seriously challenged or exposed as a lie Hastert's attempt to draw a direct line from Douglass to his party's policies, as well as Thomas's assumption that excerpted remarks from an 1865 speech would be at all useful for his anti-affirmative action arguments. Embarrassing as this misreading is, I now turn to an inconvenience of a higher degree that affects all of the political children of Douglass. This inconvenience is Douglass's moral and political ambiguity toward his own ideals, an ambiguity that foresaw the failures of the policies he supported. Even if this ambiguity is not fatal to his project or legacy, we are dishonest when we ignore the deep disquietudes of Douglass's legacy.

Human Brotherhood

Douglass, like many white and black intellectuals of his time, was an Enlightenment thinker, a nineteenth-century modernist.²⁰ He believed

in progress and the advance and mission of Western civilization. Douglass's modernism, additionally, was marked by a steadfast, individualistic belief in the inevitability of Western Christendom's advance toward justice and human brotherhood, although given his traumatic experiences at the hands of Christian slaveholders, Douglass's personal faith waned.

It is clear from his autobiographies that his personal faith waned after experiencing the evil of American Christian slaveholders. In his writings he repeatedly claims that the worst slaveholders were those who professed faith, because they coated their psychological, physical, and sexual violence with Christian nostrums and, feeling justified, they then increased their crimes. It was due to the lack of ethical action on the part of American Christians that he denounces the practice of the U.S. church at every opportunity.²¹ Douglass's faith was troubled, yet it had evolved into a stubborn belief that the world would realize justice:

There are forces in operation, which must inevitably work the downfall of slavery. "*The arm of the Lord is not shortened,*" and the doom of slavery is certain. I, therefore, leave off where I began, with *hope*. While drawing encouragement from the Declaration of Independence, the great principles it contains, and the genius of American Institutions, my spirit is also cheered by the obvious tendencies of the age.²²

Humans, as evidenced by slavery, resist providential justice; thus, according to Douglass, the "downfall of slavery" required agitation and political (even military) intervention. There was much in the language of providence that Douglass had to be cynical about, yet because of its rhetorical weight, he held on to the term, with its divine connotations, to label what he thought were the progressive tendencies of the age. The age, that of the 1850s, for him and his allies was on a trajectory toward an "all-pervading light." For Douglass, that light was not the rapture; rather, it was the light of the trinity of truth, liberty, and equality. His conception of providence is most distinctly on display at the end of his famous 4th of July oration of 1852. Douglass uses Psalm 68:31 and pairs the idea of God's fiat with the image of Africa and Asia rising:

The far off and almost fabulous Pacific rolls in grandeur at our feet. The Celestial Empire, the mystery of ages, is being solved. The fiat of the Almighty, "*Let there be Light,*"

has not yet spent its force. No abuse, no outrage whether in taste, sport or avarice, can now hide itself from the all-pervading light. The iron shoe, and crippled foot of China, must be seen, in contrast with nature. *Africa must rise and put on her yet unwoven garment. "Ethiopia shall stretch out her hand unto God."*²³

Douglass's conception of providence, with its individualism, anti-supernaturalism, and activism, led directly to his conception of universal human brotherhood. The biblical doctrine of human brotherhood was held dearly by Douglass, and he believed in it more thoroughly than many of his white abolitionist colleagues. Human brotherhood, for Douglass, was a Christian doctrine that asserted that God created all the peoples of the earth out of "one blood." According to Douglass, this matter was unequivocally supported by biblical text, and a rejection of it amounted to a rejection of the credibility of the Good Book. Obviously, for his audience and the time, such an argument challenged and contradicted U.S. polygenists (who were claiming that blacks were a separate and an inferior species) and presented a powerful dilemma:

The unity of the human race—the brotherhood of man—the reciprocal duties of all to each, and of each to all, are too plainly taught in the Bible to admit of cavil.—The credit of the Bible is at stake—and if it be too much to say, that it must stand or fall, by the decision of this question, *it is proper to say, that the value of that sacred Book—as a record of the early history of mankind—must be materially affected, by the decision of the question.*²⁴

This doctrine, as used by Douglass and the abolitionist movement, was based on the Bible's creation story and Acts 17:26: "And hath made of one blood all nations of men for to dwell on all the face of the earth (King James Edition)." Beyond an account of origins and unity, the doctrine of human brotherhood carried with it the moral injunction that since we are all equally human we are all equally deserving of human rights.

Although he believed that the biblical account was correct, for Douglass the doctrine was an essentially religious and moral one that held no matter what the biological facts about race were. Given this position, he had little patience for the U.S. school of polygeny, and its argument—a non sequitur that commits the naturalistic fallacy—that the biological inferiority of blacks justifies their being

denied human rights. Thus Douglass takes special aim at the work of U.S. polygenists Josiah Nott, George Gliddon, Louis Agassiz, and Samuel Morton.²⁵ In addition to taking issue with their science, he argued that even *if* blacks were a distinct species, and even *if* they were inferior, they were, as a part of humanity and children of God, entitled to full human rights.

Douglass, obviously from his amalgamationist position, accepted the existence of biologically distinct races.²⁶ He accepted a climatist monogenism, which asserted the unity of the human species, and that human diversity was due to the climates of the lands in which the races were isolated for centuries. His acceptance of races needs to be qualified, however, because he did not put great weight on what he characterized as merely "technical" distinctions in the brotherhood of humanity. Although he did not deny these "technical distinctions," he believed that the existence of these distinctions ebbed and flowed and were overshadowed by human fraternity.

Douglass supported the amalgamation of the biological races and the assimilation of black and white Americans into what he imagined as a new sort of American. The distinction between assimilation and amalgamation must be noted to understand Douglass's project. Assimilation and amalgamation are separate doctrines. Amalgamation does not follow by itself from assimilation, or vice versa. Early black nationalists, such as Edward Blyden, Martin Delany, and Alexander Crummell, were separatists, but they also thought that blacks needed to assimilate by accepting Christianity and Western civilization.²⁷ Booker T. Washington, while not a black nationalist, also accepted an assimilationist-separatist strategy. Douglass's position, since he held that blacks and whites would not only assimilate to each other but also amalgamate into an intermediate race, supported a program of assimilation and amalgamation.

Douglass began to advocate the controversial position of amalgamation during the 1860s. More than a strategy, he thought it was a process that would naturally occur in the United States over time, eventually creating an intermediate race. He believed that amalgamation, combined with assimilation, would be the "only solid, and final solution" of race prejudice and division in this nation.²⁸ As he remarked to a reporter the day after his controversial second marriage to Helen Pitts, a white woman:

... there is no division of races. God Almighty made but one race. I adopt the theory that in time the varieties of races will be blended into one. Let us look back when the black and the white people were distinct in this country. In

two hundred and fifty years there has grown up a million of intermediate. And this will continue. You may say that Frederick Douglass considers himself a member of the one race which exists.²⁹

Douglass's stance on assimilation and amalgamation speaks volumes about his stance on the conservation of race. He equated the preservation of racial distinctiveness to the preservation of racial prejudice. The positions he took on many topics were informed by his stance against racial separatism and the conservation of the races in the United States.

Douglass reproved attempts to build separate "negro pews, negro berths in steamboats, negro cars, Sabbath or week-day schools, . . . churches," and so on.³⁰ He argued that attempts to separate blacks were in the interests of pro-slavery and would hinder black uplift. It is for these reasons that he stood against the separatist, emigrationist visions of the American Colonization Society, founded by whites, and the African Civilization Society, founded by blacks.

Although Douglass disfavored racial organizations, he thought it was necessary for African Americans to organize and unify to fight against slavery and racial prejudice, and to struggle for justice.³¹ Nonetheless, for Douglass, this political organizing and unification was not to be for reasons of race or culture but strictly for political reasons. While he expected blacks to unify to fight for the end of slavery and for justice, he railed against separatist accommodations, institutions, and organizations, and he urged blacks to act "without distinction of color."³²

Douglass's "final solution" was the complete assimilation, dispersal, and amalgamation of blacks into the white population. To this end Douglass vigorously rejected notions of race pride, racial union, and black nationalism.³³ To those who argued that black race pride had to be cultivated to oppose oppression, he responded:

But it may be said that we shall put down race pride in the white people by cultivating race pride among ourselves. The answer to this is that the devils are not cast out by Beelzebub, the prince of devils.³⁴

Race pride, according to Douglass, could not be used to fight racism; likewise, self-segregation could not be used to fight segregation. Such tactics undermined the possibility of the "final solution" and, worse, denied the interrelatedness of black and white American

identity that drove him to affirm amalgamation and assimilation as solutions in the first place. For Douglass, the emergence of a new, brown America identified them as true children of the United States, and thus citizens. Black American identity, according to him, was profoundly American. Black Americans were the product of amalgamation with white Americans, and due to this ancestry they were native by being born in the United States. Because of the particular ancestry of black Americans, they also were Americans by culture.³⁵ As Douglass argued, black Americans are native to America, were products of U.S. history, and belonged in no other land:

The native land of the American Negro is America. His bones, his muscles, his sinews, are all American. His ancestors for two hundred and seventy years have lived and laboured and died, on American soil, and millions of his posterity have inherited Caucasian blood. It is pertinent, therefore, to ask, in view of this admixture, as well as in view of other facts, where the people of this mixed race are to go, for their ancestors are white and black, and it will be difficult to find their native land anywhere outside of the United States.³⁶

Black Americans, along with native-born whites, and Native Americans (though Douglass held the popular belief that they were headed toward extinction) were uniquely American in this regard. The uniqueness of being American was important to Douglass, because the emergence of this new group, through birth and the comingling of culture and lineage, was providence in action, it was the coming into being of the brotherhood of man in the United States. Black and white U.S. citizens are bound together; as such, their identities, histories, and destinies are likewise bound. This is Douglass at his most progressive point, but it is also his most enduring gift to black American conservatism.³⁷

Although some of the particulars of Douglass's arguments have been rejected, his idealistic vision of human brotherhood, his skepticism about the political and moral value of race pride and self-segregation, his rejection of race as a political or social category, and his hope that assimilation and racial amalgamation will bring an end to racial oppression and result in a stronger America, more consistent with its founding liberal principles, remain influential in contemporary U.S. racial politics. Douglass's conceptions of justice and human brotherhood resulted in his conceptions of race and the black American. With

this background, he headed toward a reading of the U.S. Constitution that required the realization of the ideals ensconced within its texts and progress toward their actualization.

Wicked Intentions

After escaping from slavery and joining with William Loyd Garrison's American Anti-Slavery Society, Douglass took up the party's position that the Constitution was a pro-slavery document.³⁸ In 1851, in a letter to Gerrit Smith, an abolitionist opposed to the political and legal positions of the Garrisonians, Douglass announced his change of opinion about the intentions of the Constitution, but not the intentions of the framers, on the matter of slavery.³⁹ Douglass, in 1847, had conceded that a "strict reading" of the Constitution did not evince a pro-slavery stance, and after much thought he conceded to Smith's argument that not only is the Constitution an anti-slavery document, but that the abolition of slavery can be accomplished by working through the legal and political means determined by the Constitution.⁴⁰ Douglass no longer wanted to leave the Constitution and political institutions, such as voting or holding political offices, as tools for the slaveholder.

Why Douglass changed his opinion about the proper interpretation of the Constitution has been the subject of a fair amount of literature.⁴¹ The reasons for his change of opinion were interpretative and practical, but they also were remarkably personal. These three facets of his shift should be attributed to the conceptions of providence and human brotherhood that composed his moral universe. Doing so makes his change far less puzzling and less like mere political opportunism, although it does not necessarily redeem his vision of liberation through assimilation and amalgamation.

Understanding Douglass's change begins with considering three interrelated personal factors that had an immense effect on his intellectual and political development: (1) Douglass's break with Garrison and his followers over his (2) decision to start and edit his own paper, (3) and his growing friendship with Gerrit Smith. In his second and third autobiographies, he discussed his change of opinion always in relationship to his assertion of independence from Garrison and the founding of the *North Star* in 1847:

I can easily pardon those who have denounced me as ambitious and presumptuous, in view of my persistence in this enterprise. I was but nine years from slavery. In

point of mental experience, I was but nine years old. That one, in such circumstances, should aspire to establish a printing press among an educated people, might well be considered, if not ambitious, quite silly. My American friends looked at me with astonishment! "A wood-sawyer" offering himself 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. Nevertheless, I persevered.⁴²

He established his paper in Rochester, New York, and during that same year he and Smith developed their friendship.⁴³ Douglass grew more confident, and more independent from the Garrisonians, and he began to reconsider his position. Again, as with his account of the founding of the *North Star*, he represented his change of opinion as part of his intellectual emancipation from slavery and his old patrons.⁴⁴

One is tempted to imagine that their warm and equitable friendship worked hand in hand with Smith's arguments about constitutional interpretation to ultimately change Douglass's mind. What is so interesting about the personal reasons behind his change of opinion is that they are illustrative of Douglass's conceptions of freedom and human brotherhood. The stories, in Douglass's second autobiography, of the founding of the *North Star*, his friendship with Smith, and his change of opinion, were iterations of the story of his self-emancipation, the story of his first autobiography. All of these stories are tales that demand absolute equality and independence of body and mind.

His friendship with Smith exposed him to the anti-slavery constitutional interpretation of the Liberty Party, which led him to consider the role of natural law in the Constitution and the importance of understanding the document according to a strict reading of its text.⁴⁵ In 1849, Douglass admitted that " 'the Constitution, *if strictly construed according to its reading,*' is not a pro-slavery instrument," but he disagreed with Smith that such a strict and charitable reading of the document was correct.⁴⁶ However, Douglass began to change his mind as he grew more independent from the Garrisonians, as he realized the imprudence of Garrisonian isolation, and as he grew in his understanding of natural law theory and the subtlety of constitutional interpretation.

David Schrader, in his paper "Natural Law in the Constitutional Thought of Frederick Douglass," argued that Douglass held, at the

time of his change of opinion, that the United States was founded on principles of natural law. The evidence for this position, as Douglass argued in his 1857 speech "The Dred Scott Decision," lies in three sources: "the Constitution, the Declaration of Independence, and the sentiments of the founders."⁴⁷ For Douglass, the Declaration of Independence contained the intention of founding a state on principles of natural law. Those intentions were repeated in the preamble of the Constitution and were evident in the sentiments of the founders.

Douglass was well aware of the duplicity of the founders' sentiments, the race-conscious intentions and connotations of the Constitution.⁴⁸ Nonetheless, he differentiated between the original intentions of "We, the people" and the wicked intentions of a few:

It is clearly not because of the peculiar character of our Constitution that we have slavery, but the wicked pride, love of power, and selfish perverseness of the American people. Slavery lives in this country not because of any paper Constitution, but in the moral blindness of the American people. . . .⁴⁹

This distinction is repeated in his criticism of Chief Justice Taney's opinion in the *Dred Scott* case:

The Supreme Court of the United States is not the only power in this world. It is very great, but the Supreme Court of the Almighty is greater. Judge Taney can do many things, but he cannot perform impossibilities. He cannot bale out the ocean, annihilate the firm old earth, or pluck the silvery star of liberty from our Northern sky. He may decide, and decide again; but he cannot reverse the decision of the Most High. He cannot change the essential nature of things—making evil good, and good evil.⁵⁰

Further, as Schrader argues, Douglass perceived that the founders were aware of their conflicts and sought to conceal their divided intentions under unfortunate ambiguities. Given these very ambiguities, Douglass argues in his 1860 speech "The Constitution of the United States: Is It Pro-Slavery or Anti-Slavery?," which was delivered in Glasgow, Scotland, that it was "folly" and "absurd" to get a clear determination from the conflicted and contradictory intentions of the American people—for it is they as a whole who contracted—at the time of the original contract.⁵¹

Douglass's priority in his abolition activities was the nation's moral, political, and religious responsibility to end American slavery *for the sake of American slaves*. The nation's responsibility, according to Douglass, was primarily to the enslaved. Douglass's orientation on this matter was clearly not shared by many of his white abolitionist contemporaries. Some of them, perhaps John Brown, shared Douglass's black reasons, because they saw beyond self-interested white reasons or engaged a black perspective: slavery was an *evil* committed against black *persons*.⁵² Others, in the movement and the population at large, had white interests in mind, such as the stability of the nation, non-participation in evil, or the state of white souls.⁵³

With black reasons for ending slavery as the background for his deliberations, he reconsidered the role of the Constitution and the value of maintaining the Union with the slaveholding states. After coming to the conclusion that the Constitution was not necessarily a pro-slavery document, he then determined that, given the moral imperative to end slavery, it was prudent to engage political and legal means as well as moral suasion:

The dissolution of the Union is not only an unwise but a cowardly measure—15 millions running away from three hundred and fifty thousand slaveholders. Mr. Garrison and his friends tell us that while in the Union we are responsible for slavery. He and they sing out "No Union with slaveholders," and refuse to vote. I admit our responsibility for slavery while in the Union, but I deny that going out of the Union would free us from that responsibility. . . . The American people have gone quite too far in this slaveholding business now to sum up their whole business of slavery by singing out the cant phrase, "No union with slaveholders." To desert the family hearth may place the recreant husband out of the presence of his starving children, but this does not free him from responsibility. If a man were on board of a pirate ship, and in company with others had robbed and plundered, his whole duty would not be performed simply by taking the longboat and singing out "No union with Pirates."⁵⁴

The image of the isolated rower proud in his noncomplicity, but impotent, is a devastating critique of Garrison and other transcendentalist political recluses. American transcendentalist isolation was no neutrality but an ignoble cowardice, and its immorality was

deepened because it was also terribly vain: it was based on the love of the white self rather than the black other.

Beyond Douglass's demands for political engagement, his arguments for an anti-slavery interpretation of the Constitution are defensible. Douglass was not a fool, as he certainly understood the power of the arguments for the other position—he vigorously defended that position through 1850. He changed his position because he became convinced that the Constitution was a vehicle for natural law, and despite the wicked intentions of some of the framers, the spirit of the document declared universal liberty and equality.⁵⁵

Additionally, the role of friendship in Douglass's interpretation of the Constitution elucidates his staying power as a point of reference in race debates. Douglass's legacy is a witness to the presence and possibility of interracial *philia* and *eros* in American life. Douglass's personal story, although it was filled with many disappointments, affirms his own conception of human brotherhood and the ideals enshrined in the preamble of the Constitution.

Between Madness and Reconciliation

Booker T. Washington was quick to align himself with Douglass's legacy, while Du Bois offered careful criticism and claimed that his own call for social and political equality was a continuation of the best of Douglass's policies. Others through the decades claimed Douglass as an ally, such as Martin Luther King Jr., or they rejected him, such as Malcolm X. Most of the public intellectuals and activists, such as Ralph Ellison, in his novel, *Invisible Man*, followed Du Bois's lead to simultaneously embrace and push Douglass away.

Douglass throws his shadow across many contemporary academics and public figures who have participated in the debate on the future of race and racial categories. Principally, conservatives, some of whom are black and brown as well as white, who defend assimilation and demand that race be abandoned, follow, to a degree, Douglass's legacy. Justice Clarence Thomas obviously is an example of this group, as are Shelby Steele, Yehudi Webster, Richard Rodriguez, and Ward Connerly.

Among the social theorists and philosophers who have offered anti-racial theories, there are many parallels to Douglass. Most notable among this group are Anthony Appiah, Naomi Zack, Orlando Patterson, and Paul Gilroy. These social theorists and philosophers tend

to pair anti-racial metaphysical arguments with anti-racial ethical or political arguments. Typically, they reason that since race is not biologically real, then it is a morally illegitimate social category. For them it is simple: race is a tragic social illusion that we are better off without. These theorists, though, are not to be confused with the conservatives, for they largely support race-based initiatives that, in their minds, bring about the racial justice that is a prerequisite for living in a raceless society.

These broad groups of anti-racialist theorists reiterate the policies and ideals of Douglass that I reviewed in the last two sections: providence, human brotherhood, and the color-blind Constitution. Douglass's dream of American providence through enlightened progress reverberates in the confident cosmopolitanism of these critics and philosophers. Likewise, they are equally convinced, with Douglass, that racial categories are simply inessential and noxious qualities that obscure a more important common humanity. Further, although the anti-racial philosophers do not, as a group, embrace Douglass's color-blind interpretation of the Constitution, they with the conservatives exhibit a hope that American liberalism, through procedural and distributive justice, can deliver racial justice.

These reiterations of Douglass's policies and ideals, whether they realize they are reiterations or not, carry with them some of the shortcomings and shortsightedness that haunted Douglass's policies and ideals. Douglass always remained committed to his ideals, yet he was never naïve about the capacity of the United States to disappoint. He was aware that the sun was setting on his hopes for the nation. Indeed, in the 1890s and the decades that followed his death, the early 1900s, the decades of the Lynch mobs, and the U.S. resistance to racial justice reached murderous heights.

"What of the Night?" In 1889, Douglass posed this rhetorical question as part of his "The Nation's Problem" speech, in which he confronts America's failure to deliver social justice despite its political and religious ideals. His message was that there is no such thing as a "Negro problem." Instead, Douglass claimed, the real question is whether America will ever live up to its promises and ideals.⁵⁶

Douglass's solution to the nation's problem is standard: to live up to our religious and political ideals, to pursue cultural and political assimilation, and in time the population of America will amalgamate. He had a set of special messages for African Americans, messages that black conservatives are fond of repeating. According to Douglass, African Americans must work harder and be representative of the

best values, they should strive to live among whites, they should not cultivate race pride, and they should be enterprising and industrious as to appeal to the economic interests of white men.

The question "What of the Night?" came from his reading of Hamlet and his perception of America's moral, political, and religious failures. It was a powerful question that arose from his critical vision, but he could do no better than appeal to enterprise, assimilation, and the obliterating dream of amalgamation. So, "what of the night"?

Douglass's program of assimilation and amalgamation was predicated on the positive valuation of European culture and Western progress, and it invited a destructive cultural and political paternalism. Although Douglass did not specifically negatively value people of color—he never indulged in the internalized racism that endeared Washington to white audiences—his policies devalued their racial and ethnic difference. His vision of human brotherhood specifically set the eradication of difference as its utopian goal.

It is not clear at all how democratic, equal, and extensive was his program of assimilation and amalgamation. From what we know of the history of the U.S. racial politics after the Civil War and Reconstruction, it is evident that the policies of assimilation and amalgamation would have resulted, as Du Bois said, in "self-obliteration" without delivering to this "intermediate race" the promise of human brotherhood. As can be seen in the racial politics of nations such as Brazil and South Africa, where intermediate races were legally, and are still socially and politically, recognized, amalgamation and mixture do not necessarily bring an end to race or racial oppression.

His demand for human brotherhood gave him, as it continues to give our contemporaries, a tunnel vision that led him to ignore the history of patriarchy that accompanied the political conception of "fraternity," and to obsess on homogeneity as a universal political and ethical solution.⁵⁷ Moreover, Douglass's troubled faith in natural law and the U.S. social contract left him with a disenchanting struggle with those political shadows. As he evolved, he only occasionally confronted and apprehended the awful truth of the sexual and racial contracts, the systematic denial of equality of liberty and equality for people of color and women of all colors in American liberalism, that, like the roiling "turbid waters" of his youth, separated him and his from deliverance.⁵⁸

Despite his capacity to expose and criticize the immorality, damage, and pathology of racism, he underestimated the persistence of racism, its pervasiveness, and the advantageousness of white privilege. Thus he put too much faith in his interpretation of the Constitution,

which then set him up for near-constant betrayal and led him to underestimate the racist and destructive forces behind lynching, the myth of the black rapist, the convict-lease system, and the growing system of black peonage of the post-Reconstruction years.⁵⁹ His comfort with the "tendencies of the age" and the westward spread of modernity also is a matter of concern. His representation of the displacement of Native Americans, and his acceptance of the popular opinion of their inevitable extinction, is troubling when compared to his conception of providence.⁶⁰ This also was the case with his celebration of the illumination of Africa and Asia by Western civilization. He simply did not address in strong enough terms the genocide of Native Americans and the nation's imperialist aspirations.⁶¹

To his critics, Douglass's ideals were not suited to the post-Reconstruction challenges that faced African Americans. However, he did not limit himself to just rhapsodies on providence, human brotherhood, and natural law. He constantly demanded the actualization of justice. He did so because racial injustice was what he largely witnessed in his personal relations with whites, and in national and international political arenas.⁶² Although he experienced amazing moments of relief from racism after escaping slavery and joining the abolition movement, those moments were fleeting.

Despite the flights of ideals in his rhetoric, a consciousness of loss and glimpses of despair appeared in his writings; from his first autobiography, published in 1845, *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, an American Slave*, through his 1894 pamphlet *The Lesson of the Hour*, which answers the question "Why is the Negro Lynched?" Throughout his life as a journalist and an activist, the contradiction between American ideals and practices fed his rage and was the source of the scorching irony that he sent out to America.

The conflict between the putative political and religious ideals of this nation and its contrary practices had visited itself upon the body and mind of Douglass and his fellow bondsmen and women in the form of the sadism and gross injustices of Christian slavers. Further, behind the evolution of his political and quasitheological concepts of providence and human brotherhood was his struggle with the Christian faith—Methodism—of his youth. Douglass desperately desired that God's judgment would be visited on the heads of those who so blatantly and cruelly broke God's law, and when thunderbolts did not descend, he was pushed to the brink of apostasy.⁶³

The starkest, most referenced example of this conflict is in his *Narrative* in the scene where he longed to be on one of the tall ships sailing on the Chesapeake Bay. He gave us what he called his

“soul’s complaint” with an “apostrophe to the moving multitude of ships:”

You are loosed from your mooring, and are free; I am fast in my chains, and am a slave! You move merrily before the gentle gale, and I sadly before the bloody whip! You are freedom’s swift-winged angels, that fly round the world; I am confined in bands of iron! O that I were free! O, that I were on one of your gallant decks, and under your protecting wing! Alas! Betwixt me and you, the turbid waters roll. Go on, go on. O that I could also go! Could I but swim! If I could fly! O, why was I born a man, of whom to make a brute! The glad ship is gone; she hides in the dim distance. I am left in the hottest hell of unending slavery. O God, save me! God, deliver me! Let me be free! Is there any God? Why am I a slave?⁶⁴

Douglass presents in his “soul’s complaint” a personal and political account of the problem of evil. He goes on to state that he will find the internal resources to free himself. However, this passage is remarkable not only for its pathos and for what it records, but because it displays that in addition to the torture of his enslavement, he felt mocked by the rhetoric of political and religious ideals that surrounded him and offered him hope. He wrote in a passage that immediately follows the aforementioned, “Thus I used to think, and thus I used to speak to myself; goaded almost to madness at one moment, and at the next reconciling myself to my wretched lot.”⁶⁵

Madness brushed up against Douglass, as the impossibility associated with his delusions of miraculous escape was transferred to his politico-religious ideals. As his queries about theodicy and natality display, he confronted his abandonment by his white father, God, and his nation.⁶⁶ What resulted was the collapse of his moral universe, an experience from which he never fully recovered and which haunted, to the chagrin of his orthodox and pious allies, his writings and public statements.

Sigmund Freud’s theory of religion, from *Totem and Taboo* and *The Future of an Illusion*, elucidates that severity of Douglass’s crisis and how it relates to his lifelong flirtation with religious and political apostasy. Freud theorized that the concepts of fatherhood, God, and justice are developmentally and functionally interrelated. In *The Future of an Illusion*, Freud wrote that religious ideas were

. . . illusions, fulfillments of the oldest, strongest and most urgent wishes of mankind. The secret of their strength lies in the strength of those wishes. As we already know, the terrifying impression of helplessness in childhood aroused the need for protection—for protection through love—which was provided by the father; and the recognition that this helplessness lasts throughout like made it necessary to cling to the existence of a father, but this time a more powerful one. Thus the benevolent rule of a divine Providence allays our fear of the dangers of life; the establishment of a moral world-order ensures the fulfillment of the demands of justice, which have so often remained unfulfilled in human civilization; and the prolongation of early existence in a future life provides the local and temporal framework in which these wish-fulfillments shall take place.⁶⁷

According to Freud, the individual overcomes this “father complex,” but not completely, through the use of a variety of mechanisms, such as religious practices and ideas (that are ultimately poorly suited for the future of civilization as the theory asserts).⁶⁸ Douglass was abandoned by his father and nation, and he felt abandoned by God; where was the possibility of justice? Who would grant his urgent wish to fly? He found himself between madness and reconciliation to misery; yet he refused both, because the disappearance of father, God, and nation left open resources he was certain of: his body, self, and will.

Nonetheless, Douglass never overcame his father complex, and the shaking of the foundations of his faith reverberated through his critiques of U.S. Republicanism. After escaping from slavery and joining the abolition movement, Douglass worked for a greater reconciliation, yet again, and again he was disappointed and was left between madness and a lesser form of reconciliation. Although he never fully admitted a similar break with Republicanism, there were clear and thrilling moments when his religious disquiet was transferred to the political, and, as with the “soul’s complaint” passage, he was led to the brink of *political* apostasy.⁶⁹

It is a curious thing to find in the icon of human brotherhood statements of near-apostasy from the religious and political ideals of unity and equality. These statements, however, are not out of place, because they accompany his disappointment and disenchantment with the very political and religious ideals he upholds. There is a history of

near-apostasy that accompanies the development of his assimilationist and amalgamationist program.

First, there are his statements in the *Narrative* and its appendix, in which he answers the charge of being an “opponent of religion.” In the *Narrative* he draws our attention to the contradictions between Christian ideals and practice and asserts that Christian slaveholders were the cruelest because they saw their faith as justificatory. A controversy surrounded him over his refusal to thank only the actions of men, and to never thank God for the deliverance of black people.⁷⁰ Then there are his speeches and editorials in which he challenged the political efficacy of Christianity for black liberation. At various times and places he condemned U.S. Christianity and proclaimed that atheism would be better than a hypocritical Christianity, and given this hypocrisy, he said that it is not surprising that black Americans had come to loathe the Church. He goes so far as to publicly wonder what use Christianity is to black Americans in the climate of U.S. hypocrisy.⁷¹ Douglass consistently tied together his disappointment with U.S. political and religious ideals. In both, he saw a political and an ethical void that haunted him. For example, in his 1894 pamphlet *The Lesson of the Hour*, he wrote:

When the Negro looked for his body, that belonged to his earthly master; when he looked for his soul, that had been appropriated by his heavenly Master; and when he looked around for something that really belonged to himself, he found nothing but his shadow, and that vanished into the air, when he might most want it.⁷²

A year before his death, although he stubbornly hung on to his political and religious principles, he paused and recognized that those ideals left black America with nothing but their vanishing shadows—caught again between madness and reconciliation to misery. This alienation is radical, because it recognizes an unethical anti-black world that is unrelenting in its cruelty and hypocrisy. Further, this version of alienation is amazing in its depth, because as Bernard Boxill has claimed, Douglass’s conception of interdependent U.S. identity leaves no choice for the black American but to be an American, and if being American proves impossible, then the black American is left without even an identity. Or, as Douglass stated, black Americans are left with “shadows” that vanish in the air—illusions upon illusions.⁷³

Notwithstanding the shortcomings of Douglass’s vision of the racial future of the United States, we must not lose sight of Douglass’s

ideals nor his radical alienation. His consciousness of political and ethical failure, his mourning of that failure, and the resulting rage that expressed itself with scorching irony are equally constituents of his legacy. His radical alienation marked the limit, which he did not squarely face, of his vision, but that limit tells us as much about ourselves as it does about him. At the limit of his vision—of human brotherhood and American providence and justice—we get a sense of what James Baldwin called “the price of the ticket.” Douglass’s flirtation with religious and political apostasy, his radical alienation, was brought about by his occasional moments of brutal self-honesty that this nation was unwilling to pay the price of the ticket. His turmoil, a reaction of moral indignation and disorientation, a reaction to bondage in the putative land of liberty, is ours as well. We too are caught between madness and reconciliation.