

NOT A KILLER, SOLDIER, OR SUBJECT: FREDERICK DOUGLASS AND AMERICAN CITIZENSHIP

Zachary Hoffman

INTRODUCTION

"Time Makes All Things Even"

Frederick Douglass was born sometime in 1818 on a slave plantation in Maryland. He never learned his true date of birth, for it was the "wish of most masters... to keep their slaves thus ignorant."¹ Here he was raised by his grandparents, with occasional nocturnal visits from his mother, who had been separated from him in accordance with the tradition of Maryland plantations. During his enslavement, Douglass was subjected to undoubtedly the most brutal 20 years of his life, yet much of his later political thought drew upon his experiences within the institution of slavery.

The earliest moment of Douglass' life which had a palpable effect upon both the rest of his life and his political philosophy was his removal from the plantation of his owner, Colonel Edward Lloyd, to the city of Baltimore where he lived with Hugh Auld, his wife Sofia, and their son Thomas. Here, though still beholden to the will of a master, Douglass was allowed relatively more freedom and was separated from the most horrific atrocities of plantation life.

Zachary Hoffman, of West End, North Carolina, is a 2015 graduate of the Ashbrook Scholar Program having majored in Political Science and History.

¹ Frederick Douglass *Autobiographies: Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, an American Slave; My Bondage and My Freedom ; Life and times of Frederick Douglass.* (New York: Literary Classics of the United States, 1994. Print.), 15.

Indeed, it was during his initial seven years in Baltimore that he learned how to read and write, and observed the workings of a free society. After an interregnum of three years, during which the deaths of members of his old master's family forced him to be brought back to the plantation where he was born, Douglass, now a young man, returned to Baltimore. He was given even more autonomy by Hugh Auld, renting out his time to learn a trade – ship caulking – and participating for the first time in a semblance of daily life in a free community. Of course, Douglass was yet enslaved, and as such he had to surrender any earnings he had made at the end of each work week to Mr. Auld, a condition which would not be rectified until Douglass escaped from slavery a few years later.

During his return to Lloyd's plantation in Maryland, after a confrontation with his new master, Thomas Auld, Douglass was sent to live with the famed local slave breaker Edward Covey. Auld decried Douglass' time in Baltimore, saying that it had utterly unsuited him for plantation life, and before long Douglass found himself on Covey's plantation "even more awkward than a country boy appeared to be in a large city."² This was Douglass' first time as a field hand, which resulted in even more violence from Covey for perceived laziness. In addition to the nigh daily punishments for his lack of skill, Douglass was also physically and psychologically tormented by Covey so that he might be broken into obedience. After weeks of unrelenting bru-

² Douglass, *Autobiographies*, 55.

talization, Douglass fought back against Covey. Douglass had now physically defied the system which had subjugated him his entire life – his reflections upon this confrontation would later become a key component in his understanding not only of the institution of slavery, but also the role that force plays within a democracy.

After Douglass finally escaped from slavery in 1838, he lived in New Bedford, Massachusetts with his newly wed wife, Anna Murray. Here he made a modest living plying the trade of caulking which he had learned during his enslavement. However, it was during a chance meeting with infamous anti-slavery agitator William Lloyd Garrison that Douglass' political career began. After being asked to present an impromptu speech on his experiences as a slave at an anti-slavery gathering, Douglass was approached by Garrison, who made Douglass an integral part of the American Anti-Slavery Society's circuit of meeting halls and congregations. It was during this time that Douglass wrote his first autobiography, *The Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, an American Slave*. Douglass' speaking prowess had actually made many question the veracity of his claims of enslavement. He later wrote two other autobiographies titled *My Bondage and My Freedom* and *The Life and Times of Frederick Douglass*, each building off of Douglass' most recent experiences and adding events which had been previously left out.

Douglass' next years were a whirl of activity. He traveled to England, fleeing from threats he had received of capture by slave hunters. The time he spent here revealed to him a society free from racial prejudice, and indeed the friends that he made here bought his freedom, so that he might be safe from the constant threat of imprisonment within the institution of slavery once more. Shortly after his return to America, Douglass opened his own newspaper *The North Star* and split from Garrison's poli-

tical views. Rather than holding the Constitution to be a pro-slavery document, as Garrison did, Douglass now argued that the Constitution, and indeed all founding documents, were understood to promise liberty to all. During the next decade, Douglass wrote profusely and spoke all across the North in support of the Abolitionist cause. Of particular note is his relationship with John Brown, an abolitionist who advocated violence as the only solution to the problem of slavery. Indeed, Douglass was offered a place in Brown's infamous raid on Harper's Ferry, but turned it down. Nevertheless, Douglass' ideology was forever changed by his encounter with Brown, now representing a synthesis of Garrison's pacifistic tendencies as well as Brown's more extreme recourse to violence.

Douglass played an integral role in both the Civil War and Reconstruction. During the Civil War, Douglass was absolutely instrumental in the formation of the first black regiments in the Union army, meeting with Abraham Lincoln himself to discuss the prospects of such regiments. Douglass went on to recruit enlistees through speeches and newspaper articles; in fact, two of his own sons served during the Civil War. During Reconstruction, he was appointed the head of the Freedman's Savings Bank, an institution aimed at providing a stable and fair opportunity for the black community to develop wealth.

These key moments in Douglass' life each influenced his developing political thought. Douglass' political philosophy can be divided, roughly, into three categories; first, a discussion of the importance of labor and self-elevation, second, a description of the moral obligations of democratic citizens, and third, an analysis of the issue of race in America. Douglass' broad range of ideas in such a tumultuous time in American history is important to contemporary society not only as a lens through which we might view America before, during, and after the Civil

War, but also as a reflection of the nation's own founding principles. The fact that Douglass, enslaved for the entirety of his early life, nevertheless found the promise of America so worthwhile that he fought for the rest of his days to deliver upon those promises is not something to be taken lightly. This thesis will discuss his views on the relation of men and labor, the moral obligations of American citizens, and finally race in America, aiming to provide a thorough understanding of one of the most nuanced political thinkers the nation has seen.

CHAPTER ONE

Honest Work, Just Reward: Douglass and Self-Elevation

American citizens were the first to ever truly believe that a man could be more than his origins. Rather than one's destiny being laid out at birth-with the child bound to follow in the footsteps of his father-Americans enjoy a complete absence of social classes, instead focusing upon the actions of the man himself. Frederick Douglass seized upon the core American belief that honest work is the sign of an honest man, incorporating it into his formulation of American citizenship. Douglass focused upon several aspects of the relation between a citizen and his work, notably the role that it plays in the development of a man's character. Contrasted with his thought on moral obligations and race, Douglass characterizes work as the domain of the individual- indeed, at some points Douglass advocates such an individualistic idea of work that it might be said to be isolating. Nonetheless, Douglass still argues that labor is beneficial to society at large. Work, to Douglass, is the great Panacea, with which the citizenry can cure any ill that might strike their nation, raising their community to the highest echelons of greatness.

Douglass' thoughts on work stem from his experiences within the institution of slavery. In the slaveholding South, work was shamed while idle luxury was idealized as the only desirable station in life. Southern slaveholders thus made it their goal in life to spend as much time as possible in indolent laziness, believing that they would realize truly sublime happiness in their sloth. However, as Douglass observed, this was far from what slave owners experienced, rather "food, to the indolent lounging, is poison, not sustenance...To the pampered love of ease, there is no resting place. What is pleasant today, is repulsive tomorrow...Neither to the wicked, nor to the idler, is there any solid peace."³ Nevertheless, the pseudo-aristocratic slave-owners "perpetuated the traditional prejudices... and kept idleness in honor. Within this aristocracy, one could encounter poor men, but not workers; misery appeared preferable to industry."⁴ Indeed, the South not only carried on the tradition of the aristocracies of Europe, it did so more viciously than any nation before. In Europe, to be a laborer was to be a serf, a part of a noble's fief, protected to a certain degree by a sense of *noblesse oblige*. In the South, to be a laborer was to be a slave, a brute to be disposed of as plantation owners wished. Thus, the link between men and labor was emphasized to Douglass while he was enslaved- to Southerners, to labor was to admit one's inhumanity. Douglass' views on labor and American citizenship are grounded in his rejection of slaveholding aristocracy, advocating self-reliance and independence in its place. One particular episode within his enslavement allowed him to realize the extent to which the institution of slavery fundamentally inverted the relation between men and work.

³ Douglass, *Autobiographies*, 193.

⁴ Alexis de Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*, trans. Harvey C. Mansfield and Delba Winthrop (Chicago: U. of Chicago Press, 2000), 335.

Douglass, when he was roughly 17 years old, was sent to the famed slave-breaker Edward Covey to be “broken in body, soul, and spirit.”⁵ Indeed, Covey succeeded in his designs; Douglass later admitted in his first autobiography that “my natural elasticity was crushed, my intellect languished, the disposition to read departed ...the dark night of slavery closed in upon me; and behold a man transformed into a brute!”⁶ Douglass recalls the constant torment, physical and psychological, that he experienced at the hands of Covey, which culminated in his fateful decision to fight back. Covey, after two hours of trying to subdue him, “gave up the contest,” gasping out that “[he] would not have whipped [Douglass] half so much” if Douglass had simply not fought back at all.⁷ As Douglass wrote, though, “the fact was, *he had not whipped me at all.*”⁸ Douglass resolved, from this point onward, to never be whipped again.

The importance of Douglass’ fight with Covey cannot be overstated. The philosophical insights which Douglass includes with his recollection of the physical brawl lay out the groundwork of his views on self-elevation through labor. Douglass, in this moment, took his life into his own hands – as he himself admitted, when he reached the point of physical rebellion against the institution of slavery he “was not afraid to die... my long-cowed spirit was roused to an attitude of manly independence.”⁹ It is this “manly independence” which is so crucial to Douglass. A slave, whether in action or thought, has no independence. Their entire existence holds as its sole object the commands of their tyrannical masters. Douglass, for the first time in his life, had substituted his own will for that of his master’s, tasting

once more the sweet promise of “his Baltimore dreams” of escape to the North.¹⁰ However, Douglass’ experience was yet deeper than a revival of hope; he ascribed this fight with Covey with changing his being fundamentally: “I was *nothing* before; I WAS A MAN NOW.”¹¹ Douglass’ awakening to the possibilities of self-improvement through hard work can be traced directly back to this clash with Covey. It was this fight which provided Douglass with insight into the necessity of force in realizing individual responsibilities.

Force, to Douglass, is a peculiar concept. He obviously used force to combat Covey, but it is also broader in its scope than simple violence. To Douglass, “a man, without force, is without the essential dignity of humanity. Human nature is so constituted, that it cannot *honor* a helpless man, although it can *pity* him.”¹² Clearly, the possession of force is a necessary condition for qualifying as a human being, at least according to human opinion. However, Douglass believed that force manifested itself in multiple ways, and is absolutely integral to functioning as an individual in society. He argued that it is one of the key faculties of man which separates him from animals: “man is distinguished from all other animals, in that he resists as well as adapts himself to his circumstances. He does not take things as he finds them, but goes to work to improve them.”¹³ Not only does man work to adjust to the situations and surroundings he finds himself in, he also labors to fundamentally change them to suit him and his fellow man better.

It is Douglass’ firm belief, then, that to labor is to exert force, manifesting one’s will in the physical world. Through this pro-

⁵ Douglass, *Autobiographies*, 58.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 58.

⁷ Douglass, *Autobiographies*, 285.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 285.

⁹ Douglass, *Autobiographies*, 286.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 286.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 286.

¹² *Ibid.*, 286.

¹³ Frederick Douglass, *Selected Speeches and Writings*, ed. Philip S. Foner (Chicago, IL: Chicago Review Press, 1999), 284.

cess, Douglass believes, men can improve themselves and their lot in life. Douglass demonstrates his thoughts on self-improvement through labor in his discussion of what he calls self-made men. In his speeches on these men, who “without the ordinary helps of favoring circumstances, have attained knowledge, usefulness, power and position,” Douglass categorizes his philosophical views on work, while also presenting an ideal towards which any citizen may dedicate themselves to attaining.¹⁴

To Douglass, work possesses three distinct components: necessity, fairness, and self-making, each one building off of the last. Necessity itself is the fundamental component of labor, “the mainspring of exertion” which absolutely compels a man “into marvelous exertion.”¹⁵ Any work undertaken in the world is begun at the promptings of necessity – whether to care for family or oneself, men will always be, in one way or another, compelled to labor in order to sustain their life. Self-made men, “who are not brought up but who are obliged to come up” present us with the perfect example of the necessity of labor; these peculiar men *had* to work for everything they have.¹⁶ Additionally, Douglass argues that all labor must be undertaken by the individual himself – there can be no waiting “for some kind of friend to put a springing board under his feet...if he waits for this, he may wait long...perhaps forever.”¹⁷ This stark, sobering view of the perils of living as an individual in a free society is somewhat unsettling, but it is ultimately empowering to the individual. The citizenry is practically forced into working, habituating them not to

“transient and fitful effort, but patient, enduring, honest... and indefatigable work.”¹⁸

This steady, methodical approach to labor is contrasted by the dangers that Douglass sees in indulgent luxury. Though Douglass did not argue against relaxation in moderation, the lifestyles of ancient and Southern aristocracy are absolutely to be avoided. He could think of no greater way to “make your son helpless” than “to simply place him beyond the reach of necessity and surround him with ease and luxury.”¹⁹ There is no room in American- democratic- society for the sloth and the laggard. Without the spur of necessity to labor, a man literally unmakes himself; insofar as he abandons work he parts “with the ability to work. To be able to walk well, one must walk on, and to work with ease and effect, one must work on.”²⁰ True happiness is thus kept from the epicurean much like food and drink was withheld from the grasp of Tantalus. In the same way, though idle loungers might, from time to time, receive benefits that they clearly did not earn, Douglass believes that the true reward, only gained from honest work, will evade them. A lucky, slothful man who “at times, gets something for nothing” will ultimately lose it, as it will “in his hands, amount to nothing.”²¹ Furthermore, it is not just the material fruits of labor which the loungeer will lose, but a core component of his humanity.

Douglass, in his analysis of the virtue of honest work, creates an absolute truth: that to be a man is to work. It is this opinion which informed his publication of an open letter in 1848 to his erstwhile master, Thomas Auld, justifying his escape to the slaveholder. Basing his argument off of their shared humanity, he explains that “nature does not make your existence depend upon

¹⁴ Frederick Douglass, “Self-Made Men.” Teaching American History. (1872). <http://www.tah.org/> (Accessed Jan 23, 2014).

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ “Self-Made Men.”

¹⁷ Ibid.

¹⁸ Ibid.

¹⁹ Ibid.

²⁰ Ibid.

²¹ “Self-Made Men.”

me, or mine to depend upon yours...we are distinct persons...equally provided with faculties necessary to our individual existence."²² Both men are able to make their way in the world as they see fit, but it is a complete reversal of human nature itself to eschew work entirely in favor of a life of laziness or ease. In the same way that the indolent lose their place in democratic society, so too does the idle aristocrat; it is the essential ability of men to be able to shape their world through work, and insofar as work is absolutely necessary for the success of the individual, work is inextricably tied to humanity. The implications of this theory are what leads to Douglass' emphasis upon an equal playing field for all within the realm of labor.

If work is an absolute necessity for the prosperity of citizens and the fulfillment of their capacities as human beings, then the opportunity to obtain work needs to be available to all equally. It is in Northern society that Douglass finds "labor so respected and the laborer so honored...here, the man of toil is no bowed, but erect and strong..."²³ The North, as opposed to the South, not only encourages its citizens to labor, but exults in their efforts. Rigid social classes, hereditary privileges and various other European sensibilities were left behind the moment that the first colonists landed on American soil. Rather, in America, "every man has his chance. If he cannot be President he can, at least, be prosperous."²⁴ It is just this chance at prosperity which Douglass defends with his emphasis upon fairness within industry.

It is this equality of opportunity which Douglass believes to be integral to a just system of labor. Strikingly, Douglass presents the plight of freed blacks as his clearest example of what, exactly, an ideal system of labor should look like. Freed

blacks, arriving in society from the institution of slavery, found themselves "without home or friends – without money or credit – wanting shelter...wanting bread...and at the same time [feeling] that he is pursued by merciless men hunters..."²⁵ Being completely isolated from society by both the circumstances of their lives so far and by prejudice, freed blacks were divorced from society, with almost no means of bettering their situation. It makes sense, then, when Douglass is criticized for asking that free blacks be left alone by society at large. However, Douglass' thoughts on the matter are far more encompassing than those critics give him credit for.

Douglass, though he certainly did ask for newly free blacks to be let alone, meant far more than just leave them to fend for themselves. Rather, when looked at holistically, his approach to the issue categorizes his thought on the need for fairness within industry. Put quite simply, Douglass asked for fair play for the black man, with important caveats. "It is not fair play to start the Negro out in life, from nothing and with nothing," he wrote – rather, "do him justice in the present."²⁶ Douglass asks simply for society to "give him a chance to do whatever he can do well."²⁷ Americans ought to live up to their own professed beliefs, so that each man can earn his reward through honest labor regardless of external, unimportant factors. All that Douglass asks is that the black man be given the opportunity to work, to be given the same chance at self-improvement as any other citizen might have.

Douglass believed that, through work, man could tangibly better himself and his civilization. Douglass singles out work besides all other factors as the deciding element in the creation of not only self-made men, but citizens in general. Work, to

²² Douglass, *Selected Speeches and Writings*, 111.

²³ "Self-Made Men."

²⁴ "Self-Made Men."

²⁵ Douglass, *Autobiographies*, 90.

²⁶ "Self-Made Men."

²⁷ *Ibid.*

Douglass, is like a natural law – “self-acting, beneficent and perfect; increasing skill according to exertion...Labor not only supplies the good things for which it is exerted, but it increases its own resources and improves, sharpens and strengthens its own instruments.”²⁸ Douglass develops a dichotomy within his understanding of labor—there is a tangible, physical reward gleaned from work as well as an immaterial, self-making component. This first one results in the real rewards of profit and expertise, benefitting the laborer physically and allowing him to further develop his capacities in a particular trade. However, Douglass places far more emphasis upon the second, self-improving aspect of work.

Labor, Douglass argues, originates in the fundamental part of a man—the soul. It is from the soul that men derive the will and habit to work, to continually improve themselves. To Douglass, “the soul is the main thing. Man can do a great many things...but he cannot build a sound ship with rotten timber...So it is with the soul. Whatever its assumptions, if it be lacking in the principles of honor, integrity and affection, it, too, will go down in the first storm.”²⁹ This emphasis on the soul leads Douglass to classify work into two distinct camps, one leading to the other: “first, barbarism; afterward, civilization.”³⁰ To Douglass, there is a clear difference between the work of the frontier, undertaken by “a Kit Carson, far out on the borders of civilization” and the work of Harriet Beecher Stowe who “would be nothing among the grizzly bears of the Rocky mountains...but when a great national evil was to be removed...the civilized world knew no earthly power equal to hers.”³¹ Though Kit is absolutely integral to the conquest of the wild, “the waves of

science and civilization rolling out over the Western prairies, soon leave him no room for his barbarous accomplishment...a higher type of manhood is required.”³² The difference is obvious; if “a man is worked upon by what *he* works on”³³ then men have to work to civilize themselves through the work of civilization itself. Backwards barbarism, though a necessity for the beginnings of prosperity, must give way to the enlightenment of civilization.

Strikingly, the most barbarous form of society was not found on the Western frontiers, but in the slaveholding South. Here “the population is sparse; from time to time one perceives a troop of slaves running through half-wild fields...one would say that society is asleep; man seems idle.”³⁴ It is just this society, where slavery “has steadily exerted an influence upon all around it,” resulting in the idolization of ease and the ridicule of labor, which Douglass exhorts American citizens to shun.³⁵ Thus, Douglass takes issue with “the growing tendency to sport and pleasure...Multitudes, unconscious of any controlling object in life, flit, like birds, from point to point...and so accomplish nothing.”³⁶ Rather, a free citizen ought to decide first that he will work, and second what it is he will work for. With this decision made, he will be able to rise to the pinnacle of his abilities and, through honest labor, work for both himself and his society.

Heretofore, Douglass has characterized labor as a solely individual effort, yet he also believed that, through labor, one could improve the lot of society at large. When Reconstruction in the South started, Douglass argued that “the right of the Negro is the true solution of our national troubles”³⁷ tying an indissoluble link between

²⁸ “Self-Made Men.”

²⁹ Ibid.

³⁰ Ibid.

³¹ “Self-Made Men.”

³² Ibid.

³³ Douglass, *Selected Speeches and Writings*, 284.

³⁴ *Democracy in America*, 331.

³⁵ Douglass, *Selected Speeches and Writings*, 592.

³⁶ “Self-Made Men.”

³⁷ Douglass, *Selected Speeches and Writings*, 592.

the welfare of the black man and of American society at large. Indeed, Douglass believed “that white and black must fall or flourish together”³⁸ The actions of both white and black citizens are bound to lead to the prosperity or destruction of the nation. As Douglass witnessed throughout his lifetime, thanks to the isolating prejudice of white society, blacks were stereotyped as a race, becoming “not personal slaves, yet in many respects...the slaves of the community.”³⁹ The solution, to Douglass, was to demonstrate, through everyday interactions with white society, that these prejudices were absurd. Douglass argued that the black man had to prove himself “worthy of equal freedom [through] an earnest and persevering effort to gain it” as “a freedom and equality obtained for us by others, and for which we have been unwilling to labor” would not solve the root of the problem.⁴⁰ Douglass exhorted his fellow blacks, that “we must get character for ourselves, as a people,” in order to dispel the prejudices around them, and the only true way to gain character is to “labor for it.”⁴¹ Freed blacks could thus integrate fully into society, thanks to their own efforts, leading to a renewal of virtue in the American community.

Douglass lionized the role of industrial integration as the key to destroying prejudices – within the trades a man is judged by what he can do, not what he looks like or where he is from. This fundamentally American idea appealed to Douglass’ sense of labor as self-elevation. A man trained within a trade, “may be thrown by misfortune, [but] if he has in his hands a useful trade, he is useful to his fellow man, and will be esteemed accordingly...”⁴² Douglass

himself was a ship caulker by trade, and was able to support himself and his family through his work at the docks of New Bedford. Thus providing for his family, Douglass was also able to integrate into society at large, bettering both himself and those around him by his labor.

Nevertheless, Douglass was often confronted with arguments detailing vastly different reasons for the success of men in this world, all relying upon what Douglass called “the good luck theory of self-made men.”⁴³ Some individuals, according to this theory, are lucky enough to have superior mental endowments, or favorable circumstances surrounding them, and are practically handed wealth and success. Much like his rejection of the aristocratic notions of heritage and birth right, Douglass rejected these arguments, instead focusing upon the power of labor as the key component of human excellence. In principle, Douglass thought it unwise to affirm that men stumble into success, as it “divorces a man from his own achievements, contemplates him as a being of chance and leaves him without will, motive, ambition and aspiration.”⁴⁴ By removing the component of work in the formation of success, this argument consigns men to be thought upon as mere playthings of fate, their lot in life completely out of their control. The result of this shift in perspective would see apathy running roughshod over the projects of men as individuals found themselves sapped of the drive to labor for success.

However, Douglass did not completely distance himself from the role that circumstance plays in the affairs of men. One particular moment stood out to him in this respect; when he was a young man, “not yet ten years old...I left Col. Lloyd’s plantation for Baltimore” to live with Lloyd’s sister and brother-in-law.⁴⁵ Douglass credits

³⁸ Ibid., 149.

³⁹ Ibid., 117.

⁴⁰ Frederick Douglass. “What are the Colored People Doing for Themselves?” Teaching American History. (July 14, 1848). <http://www.tah.org/> (accessed Jan 13, 2014).

⁴¹ Ibid.

⁴² Douglass, *Selected Speeches and Writings*, 117.

⁴³ “Self-Made Men.”

⁴⁴ Ibid.

⁴⁵ Douglass, *Autobiographies*, 209.

this happenstance as a vital part of his journey to freedom. Douglass, out of “a wide margin” of boys both “younger...older, and boys of the same age”⁴⁶ was chosen to be sent to Baltimore. At Baltimore, “thus removed before the rigors of slavery had fastened upon [him]”⁴⁷ he was able to become literate, and to observe the functions of a free society. Contrasted with the typical education received on a plantation, Douglass was, by his own admittance, extraordinarily lucky.

Circumstance, then, clearly plays a role in how one’s life plays out, but Douglass believes that there is still a need for work even in the most privileged of circumstances. At the heart of Douglass’ outlook on labor is the necessity of work to better one’s situation. Luck is dealt with much the same way. Though “fortune may crowd a man’s life with fortunate circumstances... they will...avail him nothing unless he makes wise and vigorous use of them. It does not matter that the wind is fair and the tide at its flood, if the mariner refuses to weigh his anchor...”⁴⁸ Opportunities will present themselves in the life of any individual – what makes the difference to Douglass is the will to work to take full advantage of them. Douglass himself worked to educate himself throughout his lifetime, often going to great lengths to learn in a society which had resolved that he ought not to know anything other than the will of his master.

Douglass, in his analysis of the benefits of labor, has given us an unabashed avowal of the dignity of the working man and the necessity of a free society in the flourishing of the individual citizen. However, it is just this society which Douglass focuses upon next, its needs and improvement just as important to his understanding

of a democratic nation as individual self-elevation. Indeed, a free society is only as strong as its citizenry, which places a strong moral obligation upon the denizens of the population to weave strong bonds of interdependence.

CHAPTER TWO

Character That Makes a Man a Good Neighbor: Douglass and the Obligations of Community

Frederick Douglass, though primarily concerned with the protection and liberty of the individual, nonetheless makes a strong case for the shared responsibility of the members of a community. This side of his political thought aims to demonstrate that individuals within a free society are interdependent and ought to fulfill certain duties to themselves and others. Like much of his thought, Douglass used his experiences in the institution of slavery to reinforce his arguments, effectively presenting slaveholding society as the ultimate subversion of a proper human community and thus arriving at a fuller and more complete understanding of liberty. Through his focus on individual rights and the obligations that come with them, he encouraged a reinvigorated sense of community, urging citizens to help those around them and their society. Douglass’ arguments rely upon each citizen’s recognition of the duties inherent in being a member of a free people, a recognition stemming from the natural rights – not the inherited status – of each citizen. Indeed, in his autobiographies, Douglass first formulates his ideas on moral obligations between individuals through an analysis of a society where natural rights went completely unacknowledged.

During his enslavement, Douglass was beholden to the unrestricted power of plantation owners. It is just this unrestricted,

⁴⁶ Ibid., 213.

⁴⁷ Ibid., 212.

⁴⁸ “Self-Made Men.”

irresponsible power which Douglass later focused upon in his political thought. The total divorce of the power of the slaveholder from any semblance of responsibility to those around him was the fundamental difference between slave and free society. In his second autobiography, Douglass recounts the manner in which his erstwhile master, “Colonel” Edward Lloyd, interacted with his slaves. One particular day, a slave called “Old Barney” who, as “a farrier as well as an ostler,” tended to the plantation’s horses, was set upon by Col. Lloyd for improper care of the horses.⁴⁹ Lloyd almost always found something wrong with the animals, typically in the absence of an actual mistake on Barney’s part. Douglass was shocked by this peculiar relation between these “two men, both advanced in years... equals at the bar of God,” where one was yet treated as an inferior by the other.⁵⁰ This is the perfect example of what Douglass terms irresponsible power: Barney “must stand, hat in hand, lips sealed, never answering a word... [as] the judgment of the master must be deemed infallible, for his power is absolute and irresponsible.”⁵¹ To Douglass, this fundamental corruption of the bonds between power and responsibility is unconscionable. Even within European aristocracies, one could not find such abuses of laboring serfs, thanks to the strong links between the different classes of society and the responsibilities which nobles felt they owed to serfs. In contrast to the irresponsible use of power, Douglass advocated a robust interdependence between citizens, in which strong bonds of community could be forged.

Abolitionism to Douglass was not only about the immediate destruction of the institution of slavery, but also the full integration of the black man into society. To this end, he presented arguments to both blacks and whites describing the critical role

of the interdependence of the citizens of a free society. The simple truth is that “the white man’s happiness cannot be purchased by the black man’s misery. Virtue cannot prevail among the white people, by its destruction among the black people, who form a part of the whole community.”⁵² Douglass creates an ideal for society- a community made up of strong, interdependent citizens. Each citizen should be able to support himself as an independent man but, furthermore, he should contribute to society at large to such a degree that others now depend upon him. With each citizen being thus inextricably tied to the other members of their community, the rights of all will be preserved.

It was the practical difficulties of free blacks which had prompted Douglass to make this argument; when first arriving in society, many blacks found work in what Douglass termed menial employments. Though Douglass accepted the necessity of work, it had become the case that “such employments have been so long and universally filled by colored men, as to become a badge of degradation, in that it has established the conviction that colored men are only fit for such employments.”⁵³ To Douglass, this state of affairs was simply unacceptable- “to be dependent, is to be degraded. Men may indeed pity us, but they cannot respect us.”⁵⁴ In the same way that the dependency of the slave removed him from the ties of society, the reliance of free blacks upon such servile and unskilled positions for their livelihood was an obstacle to their integration into society. In his solution – a practical, industrial education for free blacks – Douglass reveals the full extent to which citizens must be dependent upon each other. Of course, in advocating self-reliance through industrial education, Douglass does not “mean that we can be-

⁴⁹ Douglass, *Autobiographies*, 193.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, 194.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, 194.

⁵² Douglass, *Selected Speeches and Writings*, 149.

⁵³ Douglass, *Selected Speeches and Writings*, 117.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, 117.

come entirely independent of all men; that would be absurd and impossible, in the social state. But we mean that we must become equally independent with other members of the community. That other members of the community shall be as dependent upon us, as we upon them.”⁵⁵

There is a certain naivety that Douglass reveals here. Even in the face of his own experiences within the institution of slavery, he persisted in arguing that nothing more than the bonds of interdependence would check any abuses which might occur at the hands of the privileged or the prejudiced. However, Douglass can be forgiven for his optimism. Though he does place great importance upon the good-nature of humanity, he does still recognize the practical difficulties of an integrationist approach. In fact, this is one of the reasons why he so adamantly called for the immediate enfranchisement of blacks after the Civil War. Douglass writes that “We may be asked... why we want it... We want it because it is our *right*, first of all”⁵⁶ yet he also tempers this principled argument with a more practical one. It should be clear to all, Douglass writes, “here, where universal suffrage is the rule, where that is the fundamental idea of the Government, to rule us out is to make us an exception, to brand us with the stigma of inferiority, and to invite to our heads the missiles of those about us; therefore, I want the franchise for the black man.”⁵⁷ Douglass, though founded in the idealistic principles of the nation, yet points to practical justifications for the enfranchisement of blacks in order to do away with the practical difficulties of being denied the right to vote. Similarly throughout much of his thought, if it appears that Douglass is taking a princi-

pled approach, or is sometimes far too hopeful, it should be understood that he often had practical explanations for his arguments as well. He ought to be forgiven, then, for any breathlessly optimistic opinions as points of rhetoric, best suited to persuading listeners.

In the equilibrium which Douglass advocates between the citizens of a nation each man is an integral support to a larger superstructure, which results in both a better populace and a better nation. Within the civilized world, “where knowledge is power, that nation is the most powerful which has the largest population of intelligent men ...”⁵⁸ To this end, each citizen must do everything in his power to improve their capacities in order that the community improves. Douglass, believing that free blacks, “in the proportion which we...rise...in the scale of human improvement... we augment the probabilities of a speedy emancipation,” exhorted them to study closely the doctrine of natural rights, to “devote yourself to this cause, as one of the first, and most successful means of self-improvement. In the careful study of it, you will learn your own rights, and comprehend your own responsibilities.”⁵⁹ Clearly, it is only the liberty infused nation captured in the language of the Declaration of Independence and Constitution which can result in “a more perfect union” of a free community.

It was a rejection of the moral façade of the institution of slavery which led Douglass to his firm commitment to liberty. According to Southern slaveholders, the institution of slavery was a paternalistic institution, where the slaveholder cared for his slaves as his children, looking out for their best interests. Of course, just the opposite was true, and Douglass’ insights into the moral ecology of the South informed much of his political philosophy. While enslaved, as later in his life, Douglass held firmly to

⁵⁵ Ibid., 117.

⁵⁶ Frederick Douglass. “What the Black Man Wants.” Teaching American History. (1865). <http://tah.org/> (accessed Feb 1, 2014).

⁵⁷ Ibid.

⁵⁸ Douglass, *Selected Speeches and Writings*, 149.

⁵⁹ Douglass, *Selected Speeches and Writings*, 117.

the belief that the product of one's labor was irrevocably tied to oneself, and as such the act of theft is one of the greatest moral wrongs that can be committed. As Douglass himself wrote, "while I hated everything like stealing, *as such*, I nevertheless did not hesitate to take food, when I was hungry, wherever I could find it."⁶⁰ Douglass pointedly explained the reasoning behind his decision: "considering that my labor and person were the property of Master Thomas, and that I was by him deprived of the necessaries of life – necessaries obtained by my own labor – it was easy to deduce the right to supply myself with what was my own."⁶¹ Douglass relied upon the necessity of theft in this instance, but he also saw deeper inversions of morality within the slaveholding South. Col. Lloyd often found it humorous to play cruel tricks upon his slaves – being the owner of more than a thousand slaves "he did not know them when he saw them; nor did all the slaves of the out-farms know him" and as such he was afforded anonymity when speaking to his slaves.⁶² This often resulted in a conversation between Lloyd and one of his slaves, with Lloyd pressing the slave on the treatment he receives at the hands of his master. When, inevitably, the slave found fault with Lloyd's treatment, "he was immediately chained and hand-cuffed...to be sold to a Georgia traitor...This is the penalty of telling the truth, of telling the simple truth, in answer to a series of plain questions."⁶³ The very idea of truth was thus subverted within the slave-holding South, all on the whim of the few plantation owners. It was this kind of morality – involved in both lying and stealing – which Douglass ultimately rejects. Instead, he substitutes a system of morality based upon a choice between right and wrong, not simple necessity.

⁶⁰ Douglass, *Autobiographies*, 246.

⁶¹ *Ibid.*, 246.

⁶² Douglass, *Autobiographies*, 27.

⁶³ *Ibid.*, 27.

Douglass believed that, within a democratic society, citizens will be better able to pursue a truly just life. In democracies, as opposed to aristocracies, men are truly able to make their way in the world, both industrially and morally. Rather than having the traditions and codes of a great lineage, or the pressure of circumstance weighing down upon them, each citizen must make the daily choice to act correctly. Indeed, to Douglass' understanding, "men have their choice in this world. They can be angels, or they may be demons...The human heart is a seat of constant war. Michael and his angels are still contending against the infernal host of bad passions..."⁶⁴ Men in this life are constantly assaulted by "powerful forms of wrong, which appeal directly to human pride and selfishness..."⁶⁵ It is only through their daily rebuff of these advances that they continue to function as free citizens. In fact, it is just this freedom which gives their decisions weight. As Douglass previously acknowledged, slave-holding and all other forms of tyrannical society remove from the oppressed any semblance of moral authenticity. Every action taken is done for the sake of brute necessity – a forced conclusion which has no real decision making behind it beyond the need for survival. Within a liberal civilization, however, citizens have the freedom to direct their actions as they please, the very "essence of all accountability."⁶⁶ At the very roots of moral validity is the authentic choice between a multitude of options. If this is the case, though, it begs the question – what is the correct way to act?

Douglass' moral thought rests upon natural rights theory. Fundamental to this theory is the right to self-ownership, the belief that "every man is the original, rightful, and absolute owner of his own body... every man is himself...belongs to himself,

⁶⁴ Douglass, *Selected Speeches and Writings*, 458.

⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, 458.

⁶⁶ Douglass, *Autobiographies*, 248.

and can only part from his self-ownership, by the commission of a crime.”⁶⁷ Douglass clearly subscribed to the theory of natural rights as a system of negative rights, the right to be protected against certain harms. For instance, citizens’ lives are protected from harm by the right to life. It is only when one violates another’s right that one forsakes their own – the commission of a crime which Douglass discusses. In the theory of natural rights, Douglass finds an unbending moral code, which can apply to the human race as a whole.

Previous to this liberal understanding of rights and citizenship, though, a man was certainly not the owner of his own person. In ancient Greece, a man was to imitate the heroic deeds of mighty Achilles and clever Odysseus in battle, slaying his enemies in order to obtain martial honor. In the Roman republic and empire the ideal citizen was a soldier- Julius Caesar himself wrote in his field reports on the Gallic Wars of the fervor of his soldiers, and their willingness to lay down their lives for the glory of Rome. And, of course, in the monarchies of the Middle Ages, a man was nothing more than a subject to the will of the King, divinely appointed to rule over the land. Douglass, however, draws upon American founding principles- when America was founded, what it meant to be a citizen and, in many ways, a human being, was redefined completely; instead of a man being a killer, soldier, or subject, “all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable rights, that among these are Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness.” These unalienable rights extend beyond the boundaries of citizenship. Douglass envisioned the human race as one whole, each member deserving of these

rights; he writes that “Man is man the world over. This fact is affirmed and admitted in any effort to deny it. The sentiments we exhibit, whether love or hate, confidence or fear, respect or contempt, will always imply a like humanity. A smile or a tear has no nationality. Joy and sorrow speak alike in all nations, and they above all the confusion of tongues proclaim the brotherhood of man.”⁶⁸ Douglass used this argument to great effect – in order to truly live up to their own moral code, 19th century Americans had to recognize the fundamental rights of *all* men, including those who were enslaved. Anything less would not only be unjust, but a great shame upon the fundamental mission of the nation: the creation and preservation of a state where liberty was ensured for all. However, as Douglass himself acknowledged, oftentimes his words fell on deaf ears. He lamented this fact in many speeches, calling attention to the hypocrisy he saw in American society – “Oh! That the heart of this unbelieving nation could be at once brought to a faith in the Eternal Laws of justice, justice for all men, justice now and always, justice without reservation or qualification except those suggested by mercy and love.”⁶⁹ Clearly, even within the pioneering nation of a true liberal democracy, not all citizens will follow the precepts laid out before them.

Douglass is thus faced with a challenge: if we know the correct way to act-the ethics of a free nation – how do we ensure that citizens act in this particular way? Douglass’ answer is comprised of two parts. First and foremost, he believes that citizens will act correctly naturally. Simply put, “You are a man...if you were only a horse ...incapable of deciding...right or wrong, you would have no responsibility” but as it

⁶⁷ Frederick Douglass. “A Friendly Word to Maryland” (17 November 1864). http://american_almanac.tripod.com/dougmary.htm (accessed Feb 14, 2014).

⁶⁸ Frederick Douglass. “Our Composite Nationality.” *Teaching American History*. (December 1869). <http://tah.org/> (accessed Feb 26, 2014).

⁶⁹ Douglass, *Selected Speeches and Writings*, 523.

is each man has supreme responsibility to act in the correct way.⁷⁰ Douglass often used the Civil War as the perfect example of the execution of one's moral duties; he wrote "he who looks upon a conflict between right and wrong and does not help the right... despises and insults his own nature, and invites the contempt of mankind."⁷¹ Even in the face of unequal treatment of enlisting blacks by the military, Douglass believed that because of the rectitude of the cause of the Civil War – the abolition of slavery – and the recognition that black soldiers would no doubt receive for valor on the battlefield, this was a temporary setback that could be surmounted. The obligation to act ethically soundly trumped the momentary obstacle of this inequality.

Yet, it was clear to Douglass, that this natural propensity towards the fulfillment of moral responsibilities could often be obscured by the situation at hand. Undoubtedly the most arresting example Douglass ever presented of this self-deception is the case of a woman named Sophia Auld, the wife of Mr. Hugh Auld. Douglass, as a young boy, was sent to live with the Aulds in Baltimore, perhaps the most fortuitous happening in his life, thanks to his early removal from plantation life and savagery. It was here that he first met Mrs. Auld, who initially treated Douglass "simply as a child, like any other child."⁷² In fact, learning of Douglass' wish to become literate, "without hesitation, the dear woman began the task, and very soon, by her assistance, [he] was master of the alphabet, and could spell words of three or four letters."⁷³ Soon enough, though, "Master Hugh... unfolded to her the true philosophy of slavery, and the peculiar rules necessary to be observed by masters and mistresses, in the management

of their human chattels."⁷⁴ To this end, Sophia "began to shape her course in the direction indicated by her husband," encasing her heart in flint and acting as a true slave-master.⁷⁵ Self-deception – the complete rejection of what one naturally knows to be right – is thus the greatest threat to the American community at large. Douglass' solution to this subversive tendency is founded upon his ardent belief in the founding of America.

Douglass fully accepts that liberal communities can be misled and lured away from their founding principles, but those very same principles are the solution to this problem. Indeed, Douglass' main example of the necessary level of dedication to the nation was the founders themselves. These men "loved their country better than their own private interest...in their admiration of liberty, they lost sight of all other interests;" thus removing themselves from petty individual concerns, the founders were able to focus not only themselves, but their fellow Americans upon the welfare of the nation.⁷⁶ In presenting the founders as the measure of true leadership within the nation, Douglass creates a paradigm for the moral guides of society. These are men who, in the face of self-deception, the "chronic disease of the American mind and character," choose to stand by what they know to be right.⁷⁷ Of course, this ardent conviction requires a peculiar kind of character. Being such a man is indescribably difficult; in the present day, arguing that "America was right, and England wrong, is exceedingly easy...It is fashionable to do so; but there was a time when, to pronounce against England, and in favor of the cause of the colonies, tried men's souls."⁷⁸ In the face of the stalwart opposition of one's peers, the

⁷⁰ Douglass, *Selected Speeches and Writings*, 528.

⁷¹ *Ibid.*, 528.

⁷² Douglass, *Autobiographies*, 216.

⁷³ Douglass, *Autobiographies*, 217.

⁷⁴ *Ibid.*, 217.

⁷⁵ *Ibid.*, 217.

⁷⁶ Douglass, *Selected Speeches and Writings*, 195.

⁷⁷ *Ibid.*, 463.

⁷⁸ Douglass, *Selected Speeches and Writings*, 195.

moral visionaries must convince the nation to change its course and reaffirm its commitment to the bedrock upon which it was founded. Douglass again attaches the sense of duty to the actions of these citizens, external opinion notwithstanding. To the visionary, “numbers should not be looked to so much as right...He who has God and conscience on his side, has a majority against the universe. Though he does not represent the present state, he represents the future state. If he does represent what we are, he represents what we ought to be.”⁷⁹ Thus, these moral frontrunners discharge their duty to the nation in all times, directing the development of the present to a future guided by the values of our past.

Douglass clearly identified himself and his fellow abolitionists as a subset of these moral visionaries. In his lifetime, the American people had been seduced by the lies of slavery to the degree that an entire section of the nation argued not only for the institution’s preservation, but also insisted upon its beneficial and paternalistic nature. Nonetheless, Douglass still acknowledges the basic decency of the American citizen: “the people want to do what is best. They must be shown that to do right is best. The great work to be done is to educate the people, and to this work the abolitionist should address himself with full purpose of heart.”⁸⁰ This moral education can take many forms. The most prominent was that of moral suasion, using ethical arguments and rhetoric to convince listeners of the righteousness of one’s cause. Of course, on the other hand, is the escalation of the moral conflict into a physical conflagration. The quintessential example of this strategy of education is that of John Brown, a man possessed of the absolute conviction that slavery had to be abolished through any means necessary. Thus, in 1859, he launched his

infamous raid on Harper’s Ferry, aiming to seize control of the Federal Arsenal there, arming his cohort and urging a slave uprising. As events transpired, several civilians were killed, while Brown and most of his men were either captured or slain, with only a few escaping from the U.S. marines dispatched to put down the raid. Douglass, despite refusing the point-blank offer from Brown to join in the raid, nevertheless praised Brown for “lifting up once more to the gaze of a nation grown fat and flabby on the garbage of lust and oppression, a true standard of heroic philanthropy...”⁸¹

This precarious balance between force and responsibility, moral suasion and righteously-charged violence, is absolutely integral to the success of the visionary’s goals. With the correct combination of both means, Douglass believed that the citizenry can be reoriented towards the noble aspirations of their forefathers. After all, John Brown was most concerned with the destruction of the institution of slavery through the destruction of its proliferators, and as Douglass acknowledges, “we need not only to appeal to the moral sense of these slaveholders; we have need, and a right, to appeal to their fears. Sir, moral means are good, but we need something else. Moral means were very little to poor John Thomas...when the slave-catchers called upon him...”⁸² Douglass thus cements his second ideal form of moral accountability for the citizens of a nation – if the nation starts to err, there will no doubt be individuals willing to do everything they can, up to forfeiture of their lives, to preserve the values of the nation.

This argument, however, leaves one question to be resolved: when is violence appropriate in the pursuit of a moral cause? Douglass clearly approves of John Brown’s raid as a surefire way to protect and

⁷⁹ Ibid., 206.

⁸⁰ Ibid., 211.

⁸¹ Douglass, *Selected Speeches and Writings*, 374.

⁸² Ibid., 421.

revitalize the moral backbone of the nation, but nevertheless refused to be a member of the raiders themselves. The answer lies in the specific situation which Douglass and the nation found itself entrapped in during the 19th century. The institution of slavery relied upon the ignorance of slaves that much is true, but it also warped the perceptions of the slaveholders themselves. It caused them to “trample on justice and liberty so long as to become entirely oblivious of the principles of justice and liberty. It is possible for men so far to transgress the laws of justice as to cease to have any sense of justice.”⁸³ In short, moral suasion is a perfectly fine method of moving the consciences of citizens with an understanding of their place in society, but slaveholders and Southern apologists had been so twisted by the institution of slavery as to care only for their own self-interest. As such, the only true way to convince such a man – if one could call him that – is “through his fear of personal danger,” an argument stemming from pure force, a threat against the slaveholder’s self-interest.⁸⁴ In this case, it ought to be with a reluctant heart that violence is employed, but it nonetheless must be employed in order to expunge such an insidious disease as slavery from the nation. Thankfully, in contemporary society, such an absolutely corrupting institution is far from the power that slavery possessed in its dominion over the South.

Douglass’ moral precepts are thus complete. Relying upon a solid understanding of American founding documents, he advocates a community of interdependent citizens, strengthened by their relations to each other and protected by their natural rights. The natural tendencies of the community, alongside the moral insights of visionary members of society will ensure that the just virtues of the nation will not fade over time, as the citizens work to create

a stronger nation as they improve their own lives.

CHAPTER THREE

To Make Real the Promises of Democracy: Douglass and Race in America

America’s founding was predicated upon the high-minded ideals of liberty, equality and justice. The republic that followed was the world’s first government which affirmed the right of the citizenry to govern. In principle, the recognition of the natural rights of the populace was the cornerstone of this new nation, where men would truly be equal before the law. However, in practice, the nation was divided as if by a canyon; starting from the first landings of European colonists, slave labor was used to cultivate vast fields of cash crops. Later, as the colonies developed into a Union, the Northern states outlawed the institution of slavery, whereas Southern states embraced it, organizing their entire society around it. It was just this societal composition which lead Southern statesmen to develop arguments defending the institution as a positive force, believing that slavery was ultimately doing more good than harm. Within these arguments were articulated the first precepts of racial inequality – Southerners “combined in the most fatal manner” the concept of race and slavery, such that “the remembrance of slavery dishonors the race, and race perpetuates the remembrance of slavery.”⁸⁵ Thus, even after the abolition of slavery, the recurrence of prejudice was entirely unavoidable.

Within a democracy, prejudice is especially insidious. A democracy, *per se*, is beholden to the thoughts and opinions of its citizens. Even if “a man places himself outside the prejudices of...race...a whole people cannot thus put itself in a way above

⁸³ Douglass, *Selected Speeches and Writings*, 421.

⁸⁴ *Ibid.*, 421.

⁸⁵ *Democracy in America*, 327.

itself.”⁸⁶ Once inculcated within a democratic population, racism becomes a perennial fetter upon the minds of the citizenry. Even today, this distortion of American democracy has not been removed. There are countless examples every month demonstrating that many Americans still cling to this disgraceful mode of thinking. Prejudice, whether institutionalized or not, “[poisons] the fountains of justice, and [defiles] the altars of religion. It acts upon the body politic as the leprous distilment acted upon the blood and body of the murdered king of Denmark.”⁸⁷ The question that remains is “what *can* be done?”—after a great Civil War, leading to emancipation, and the Civil Rights movement, ending institutionalized segregation, we are still plagued by the all too real specter of racially-charged bigotry.

Frederick Douglass offers a unique solution to the issue of race. His first ideas on race in America can be found in his autobiographies. In writing these accounts of his life, Douglass sought to prove the humanity of the black man not only through heart-rending accounts of the quotidian horrors of enslavement, but also by the fact that he, himself a black man, had written down an account of his time enslaved. Douglass, at this point in his life, had become so adept at delivering brilliant oratories that some suspected that he had never been enslaved at all—his *Narrative* sought to put an end to such thoughts. In one chapter, Douglass recounts the “days between Christmas day and New Year’s” which “are allowed the slaves as holidays.”⁸⁸ The fact was, however, that during these “holidays” slaves were expected to while their day away in “sports ...dancing, and drinking whisky... A slave who would work during the holidays, was thought, by his master, undeserving of

holidays.”⁸⁹ These holidays thus kept slaves docile, as “to enslave men, successfully and safely, it is necessary to have their minds occupied with thoughts and aspirations short of the liberty of which they are deprived... These holidays are conductors or safety valves to carry off the explosive elements inseparable from the human mind...”⁹⁰ Freedom is so desired by humans that slaveholders had to go out of their way to disguise it behind a façade of license and folly. Douglass, in exposing this deception, presents slaves as beholden of human capacities and emotions, revealing a baseline of equality between the races. To further prove his point, Douglass questions the very origins of prejudice itself.

In the 19th century many argued that prejudice was a natural part of the human condition. The separation of people upon the lines of race was simply the result of atavistic tendencies, proven true by the course of history. Society itself requires “a class to do the menial duties, to perform the drudgery of life...a class requiring but a low order of intellect and but little skill.”⁹¹ Of course, in the South this resulted in the institution of slavery and, throughout the country, the degradation of the black man. Douglass, however, challenged the notion that prejudice has been ingrained in the human psyche. Rather, he argued that it is a product of one’s environment, the result of a longstanding habituation to look upon different races as inferior. Douglass recounted that he could not “remember to have met with a *boy*, while I was in slavery, who defended the slave system; but have often had boys to console me, with the hope that something would yet occur, by which I might be made free.”⁹² In their youth, these

⁸⁶ *Democracy in America*, 342.

⁸⁷ Douglass, *Selected Speeches and Writings*, 725.

⁸⁸ Douglass, *Autobiographies*, 289.

⁸⁹ *Ibid.*, 289.

⁹⁰ *Ibid.*, 290.

⁹¹ James Henry Hammond. “Mud Sill Speech in the Senate.” *Teaching American History*. (1858). <http://tah.org/> (accessed Jan 27, 2015).

⁹² Douglass, *Autobiographies*, 224.

boys “believed [Douglass] had as good a right to be free as *they* had; and...they did not believe God ever made any one to be a slave.”⁹³ Prejudice, then, is the result of exposure to notions of racial inequality, notions which humans are born without, yet glean through their interactions within a corrupted society. Douglass was now faced with a conundrum; who is able to change prejudice, and how can it be done?

Douglass’ early thought on race gravitated wildly between the continuum of pacifistic and more extreme measures with which to combat racism. Douglass, himself a member of the American Anti-Slavery Society, was initially concerned most with winning over the hearts and minds of listeners for the abolition of slavery. Indeed, even in this tactic Douglass and his fellows admitted of the equality of all men: sympathizers to the cause of slavery would be converted easily, as “in the very heart of humanity are garnered up...all those elementary principles whose vital action...are the common inheritance of all men...”⁹⁴ To this end, Douglass delivered fiery oratories, proclaiming that:

“I will, in the name of humanity which is outraged, in the name of liberty which is fettered, in the name of the constitution and the Bible, which are disregarded and trampled upon, dare to call in question and to denounce, with all the emphasis I can command, everything that serves to perpetuate slavery — the great sin and shame of America! “I will not equivocate; I will not excuse;” I will use the severest language I can command; and yet not one word shall escape me that any man, whose judgment is not blinded by prejudice, or who is not at heart a slaveholder,

shall not confess to be right and just.”⁹⁵

Such caustic rhetoric was designed to bring about a moral conversion of listeners, some of whom would be so moved as to take up the banner of the Abolitionist cause. Throughout his career, Douglass addressed free blacks as well as whites, giving insight into the beginnings of his idea of race in America. To Douglass, the only way to fight racial prejudice was to present counter examples in daily life, demonstrating the utter lack of substance that the false claims of racism made upon blacks. The association between the individuals of society would demonstrate that all men are truly equal, being separated by no arbitrary divisions such as race. Thus, free blacks in 1848 ought to “act with all men without distinction of color. By so acting, we shall find many opportunities for removing prejudices and establishing the rights of all men. We say avail yourselves of *white* institutions, not because they are white, but because they afford a more convenient means of improvement.”⁹⁶ At this point Douglass had already oriented his thought and speeches to attempt to convince both blacks and whites that, together, they could be parts of a greater whole – a truly American society.

Even before the secession of the Southern states and the outbreak of the Civil War, Douglass was beginning to develop reservations about the purely pacifistic methods of the Garrisonians. Without question, Douglass continued throughout his life as a gifted orator, but in the face of an increasingly belligerent South, and the repeated setbacks of the Abolitionist movement (E.G. the Fugitive Slave Act of 1850, the Dred Scott decision,) Douglass began to doubt the usefulness of a strictly rhetorical approach. Clearly, appealing to the moral sense of the slaveholders was not working-

⁹³ Ibid., 224.

⁹⁴ Douglass, *Selected Speeches and Writings*, 311.

⁹⁵ Ibid., 195.

⁹⁶ Ibid., 117.

or, at least, it was not working in any demonstrable way. As the sectional divide in the nation widened, Douglass recognized that, all too soon, conflict was to be the only resolution to the issue of slavery – “no compromise can affect it. No legislation can change the inflexible law of adaptation, the eternal fitness of things. No compact can make that Right, which is wrong from its first principles to its crowning assumptions.”⁹⁷ Thus, come the Civil War, the passion which once called for a moral resolution to the institution of slavery, by winning hearts and minds, shifted focus to solving the present crisis using all means necessary. And, indeed, Douglass argued that “rebellion cannot be talked down, written down, or coaxed down. It has got to be beaten down, and the heaviest blow that can be given is the right blow to give... War was made to hurt, and those who provoke it ought to be hurt... There is no whipping the traitors without hurting them.”⁹⁸ To Douglass, insofar as the South had now seceded from the Union, had committed atrocious crimes against humanity, and was now the aggressor in the war, believed that violence was totally justified in “[compelling] them to come back to the Union whipped and humbled into obedience...”⁹⁹

Douglass thus began the task of calling the nation to arms. “Action!” he cried, “Action! Not criticism, is the plain duty of this hour. Words are now useful only as they stimulate to blows.”¹⁰⁰ Douglass himself was the most prominent voice advocating for the participation of free blacks in the Civil War. Indeed, after the call for the enlistment of black soldiers in the 54th Massachusetts, soon to be the first black regiment in American history, Douglass immediately began recruiting potential sol-

diers. The arguments he made are once again indicative of his position concerning the role of blacks after the Civil War. To Douglass “liberty won by white men would lose half its luster” and so he exhorts blacks to “win for ourselves the gratitude of our country, and the best blessings of our posterity through all time.”¹⁰¹

Of course, Douglass’ argument was complicated by the circumstances of the time. Contrary to what he had been led to believe, black enlistees would be paid less, and were often equipped with substandard materiel. Nevertheless, Douglass carried on his work, believing that the momentary setbacks and harms incurred by black soldiers would ultimately be worthwhile. Enlistment would serve as a demonstration of the “willingness... [and] earnest desire to fulfill any and every obligation which the relation of citizenship imposes... Enlist and you make this your country in common with all other men born in the country or out of it.”¹⁰² The unquestionable benefit of black enlistment, Douglass believed, was found in the proof of commitment to the nation by the soldiers themselves. Indeed, Douglass’ own sons enlisted in the army, following through on their father’s advice. Any citizen possessed of the notion that blacks were not, or could not be citizens would quickly be disillusioned by the example of blacks “nobly defending the liberties of [their] own country against rebels and traitors.”¹⁰³ Thanks to the contact between black and white soldiers, racism would be quickly stamped out as the brotherhood of a military corps replaced it.

Douglass here affirms the responsibility that blacks held to their race and, clearly, to their country – fighting in the Civil War would at once affirm their manhood and their citizenship. He thus pro-

⁹⁷ Douglass, *Selected Speeches and Writings*, 335.

⁹⁸ *Ibid.*, 454.

⁹⁹ *Ibid.*, 528.

¹⁰⁰ Douglass, *Selected Speeches and Writings*, 526.

¹⁰¹ *Ibid.*, 526.

¹⁰² *Ibid.*, 528.

¹⁰³ *Ibid.*, 528.

claims that “we are not to be saved by the captain, at this time, but by the crew. We are not to be saved by Abraham Lincoln, but by that power behind the throne, greater than the throne itself. You and I and all of us have this matter in hand.”¹⁰⁴ It was the people who had the power and responsibility to battle with the Confederacy and the institution of slavery, and it is still the people who can combat prejudice in their daily lives. It is not enough to “[merely quote] the doctrine of equality as laid down in the Declaration of Independence, but we should give it practical illustration. We have to do as well as to be.”¹⁰⁵ It is indeed the case that a whole people cannot separate itself from its deep seated prejudices and bigotry, but Douglass chooses to focus not on the whole, but on the individual. A single man can set himself apart from prejudice, and what is a people composed of if not individual men and women?

Douglass demonstrates the culmination of his thought on race during Reconstruction. Indeed, in no uncertain terms he provides both goal and method-ology for his vision of race in America. Douglass’ argument is something of a synthesis of the opinions he had expressed earlier in his life. As he argued during the Civil War, and as he had demonstrated during his time with the Garrisonians, “when this evil spirit [of prejudice] is judge, jury, and prosecutor, nothing less than over-whelming evidence is sufficient to overcome the force of unfavorable presumptions.”¹⁰⁶ Thus, in order to tear down bigotry concerning the black man “all arbitrary barriers against his manhood” that is, those barriers erected by prejudice itself, “shall be removed, and a fair chance in the race of life be given him.”¹⁰⁷ In practical terms, this means that the true way to defeat racism is through the simple daily inter-

actions citizens have with one another. By removing obstacles to the communication of the different people of the nation – disenfranchisement, segregation and the like- our citizenry, to Douglass, would come to a rapid conclusion. People are, fundamentally, people. There is no substantial distinction between the different races in America. As Douglass writes, “We are a country of all extremes, ends and opposites; the most conspicuous example of composite nationality in the world. Our people defy all the ethnological and logical classifications. In races we range all the way from black to white, with intermediate shades which, as in the apocalyptic vision, no man can name or number.”¹⁰⁸ Yet, it is not race which cements our nationality, but our commitment to “the only principle which can solve that difficulty and give peace, strength and security to the Republic...the principle of absolute *equality*.”¹⁰⁹ As long as Americans commit themselves to this principle, they will find themselves surrounded not by persons who differ from them, but by fellow citizens, who all believe in the same dream.

Yet, throughout his discussion of race, Douglass presents a curious image of race pride. He freely admits that “for my part I see no superiority or inferiority in race or color. Neither the one nor the other is a proper source of pride or complacency. Our race and color are not of our own choosing ...the only excuse for pride in individuals or races is the fact of their own achievements.”¹¹⁰ Yet, at the same time, Douglass acknowledges that “there is no other man in the United States prouder than myself of any great achievement...of which any colored man or woman is the author.”¹¹¹ He reconciles the two through a startling proposition- that it is not race which spurs him to pride in the triumphs of free blacks, but “because I

¹⁰⁴ Douglass, *Selected Speeches and Writings*, 546.

¹⁰⁵ *Ibid.*, 725.

¹⁰⁶ *Ibid.*, 648.

¹⁰⁷ *Ibid.*, 648.

¹⁰⁸ “Our Composite Nationality.”

¹⁰⁹ *Ibid.*

¹¹⁰ Douglass, *Selected Speeches and Writings*, 725.

¹¹¹ *Ibid.*, 725.

am a man, and because color is treated as a crime by the American people. My sentiments at this point originate not in my color, but in a sense of justice common to all right minded men. It is that which gives the sympathy of the crowd to the underdog, no matter what may be his color.”¹¹² To Douglass, any and all men ought to be especially mindful of and inspired by the achievements of the black man, just as they are especially encouraged by the accomplishments of self-made men; the important factor is not race, but the fact that such magnificent victories are won in spite of the assembled opposition.

Coinciding with this sentiment is Douglass’ view of blacks as a part of American society. Douglass’ aim, during every part of his political career, had been a seamless integration of blacks into society and the body politic as the solution to prejudice. During Reconstruction particularly, Douglass made the case that “the true way and the easiest way...to make our government entirely consistent with itself [is to give] to every loyal citizen the elective franchise” as a sort of “wall of fire” for both the citizen’s protection, and that of the nation.¹¹³ It was feared that lingering Confederate sympathizers could jeopardize Reconstruction, and so Douglass provided a practical argument – that free blacks would undoubtedly be most loyal to the Union- alongside a principled argument – that the right to vote is fundamentally deserved by all citizens- in his speeches for black enfranchisement. Integration into the body politic would thus be completed relatively swiftly, but of course even within Douglass’ lifetime Southern states made it practically impossible for blacks to vote through the regional disenfranchisement thanks to myriad loopholes such as the poll tax. Even so, Douglass still thought the solution was quite simple:

Southerners “are not required to do much. They are only required to undo the evil they have done, in order to solve this problem. In old times when it was asked, “how can we abolish slavery?” the answer was “quit stealing.” The same is the solution of the race problem today. The whole thing can be done simply by no longer violating the amendment of the Constitution of the United States, and no longer evading the claims of justice.”¹¹⁴ If there is one thing Douglass could be faulted for, it is just this unending optimism. Indeed, from the time of Reconstruction it took the better part of a century to complete the work of providing to all citizens the rights they were due. Yet, Douglass ought not to be set aside simply for his faith in the American people – if anything, his appeal to “the better angels of our nature” indicates a conviction in the fundamental rectitude of both the nation and its denizens.

Finally, Douglass made another request of free blacks concerning integration. In order to form a better, more unified nation, blacks ought to associate freely with whites rather than sequestering themselves in select communities. To Douglass, “the trouble is that when we assemble in great numbers anywhere we are apt to form communities by our-selves...When we thus isolate ourselves we say to those around us ‘We have nothing in common with you,’ and, very naturally, the reply of our neighbors is in the same tone and to the same effect; for when a people care for nobody, nobody will care for them.”¹¹⁵ Racism will not be defeated through separation and segregation, but through the association and cooperation of all races. Douglass thus calls for a reinvigorated sense of national solidarity, for “a nation within a nation is an anomaly. There can be but one American nation under the American government, and we are

¹¹² Douglass, *Selected Speeches and Writings*, 725.

¹¹³ *Ibid.*, 592.

¹¹⁴ Douglass, *Selected Speeches and Writings*, 750.

¹¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 725

Americans.”¹¹⁶ The claim to country, to Douglass, trumps the claim to race. A good citizen is not judged by race, but by their commitment to the principles of the Union.

Frederick Douglass maintained a staunch conviction of the immorality of slavery and the prejudice it inspired. Though the institution of slavery was eventually abolished in his lifetime, the struggle to rid our nation of prejudice continues to this day. Bigotry is only able to be defeated through the steady, unyielding effort of the virtuous Americans – black or white – fighting daily for “unity; unity of idea, unity of sentiment, unity of object, unity of institutions, in which there shall be no North, no South, no East, no West, no black, no white, but a solidarity of the nation, making every slave free, and every free man a voter.”¹¹⁷

CONCLUSION

“Our Work is Not Done”

Frederick Douglass endeavored to provide guidance to America during a time when the future of the nation was shrouded in uncertainty. His political philosophy demonstrates in no uncertain terms what ought to be done in order to provide the best community possible to the citizens of the nation. Of course, work still needs to be done to complete the goals which Douglass had set out to achieve. To truly live up to the promises made by the Declaration of Independence and the Constitution will not be easy, but to shirk the responsibilities of a democratic citizen would be unconscionable. America has already surmounted great obstacles to its growth and insidious internal threats to its stability, but there is yet challenges to overcome. As Douglass explained: “fellow countrymen, it is not so much our purpose to cheer you by the

progress we have already made, as it is to stimulate you to still higher attainments. We have done much, but there is much more to be done.”¹¹⁸ The labor to improve oneself and one’s nation is a constant demand upon the physical and moral capacities of the citizenry, but, as Douglass is, it is ultimately optimistic. Though there may be countless hurdles and myriad setbacks, there is no uncertainty in the simple truth that, together, Americans can forge themselves and the nation into paragons of virtue through hard work, undertaken together.

¹¹⁶ Ibid., 725

¹¹⁷ Douglass, *Selected Speeches and Writings*, 546

¹¹⁸ Douglass, *Selected Speeches and Writings*, 117

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