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978-0-521-71787-8 - The Cambridge Companion to Frederick Douglass

Edited by Maurice S. Lee

Excerpt

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Introduction

When Frederick Douglass in 1851 changed the name of his newspaper from *The North Star* to *Frederick Douglass' Paper*, he joked, “I shall lose my reputation for being unstable if I don’t change soon” (LW 2:223). Change is indeed a major feature of Douglass’s life and writings, as is his sensitivity to his reputation in an often-critical public eye. Douglass rose to fame with the extraordinary success of his 1845 autobiography, *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, An American Slave, Written By Himself* (1845). The book, which forever altered Douglass’s life, is itself a carefully crafted record of personal transformations – from Douglass’s loss of childhood innocence under the brutality of chattel bondage, to his battle with the slave-breaker Covey (which Douglass describes as a “turning-point in my career as a slave” [N 65]), to his escape in 1838 into what he later called the “nominal” freedom of the North (LW 1:279), to his rebirth as a speaker in the American Anti-Slavery Society under the leadership of the white evangelical William Lloyd Garrison. After traveling through Great Britain in 1845–47 and having his freedom purchased by abolitionist friends, Douglass distanced himself from Garrison’s influence and founded the newspaper that would eventually take his name, thus announcing himself as the most prominent black leader and writer in the English-speaking world.

Douglass’s transformations would continue. He became increasingly militant with the coming of the Civil War, defending John Brown’s 1859 raid on Harpers Ferry and recruiting African American soldiers for the Union Army. After the war, he made an uneasy transition from radical reformer to political appointee, holding noteworthy positions in Republican administrations during and after Reconstruction. By the time of his death in 1895, Douglass was an international figure recognized as an orator, writer, statesman, and representative of his race. A main purpose of *The Cambridge Companion to Frederick Douglass* is to examine as comprehensively as possible Douglass’s diverse achievements, which occur within broad historical contexts, take multiple literary forms, draw from a wealth of intellectual traditions, and

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together have presented an ongoing challenge to Douglass scholars for over a century.

Historical Contexts

Even a cursory glance at the nineteenth century suggests that Douglass was hardly alone in experiencing radical change. When he was born into slavery in Maryland in 1818, Thomas Jefferson, Napoleon, and Sir Walter Scott were alive. When he died preparing for a speech in 1895 in his home in Washington, DC, Franklin Delano Roosevelt and James Joyce were teenagers and Hitler was six years old. During Douglass's lifetime, the United States grew from a twenty-state nation of small-scale economies and local political allegiances to a forty-four-state empire poised to expand beyond its continental borders. Railroads, telegraphs, corporations, and a powerful federal government linked the growing country together, while the rise of women's rights, immigration, Darwinism, industrialism, urbanization, and public education further altered American thought and culture. These developments influenced and in many cases were influenced by Douglass's social activism, which included the struggle not only for black freedoms, but also for the rights of women and Chinese immigrants. J. T. Jenifer, pastor of the AME Church in Washington, DC, exulted in his eulogy for Douglass: "[H]ow full his life! How completely rounded out! How interwoven in the warp and woof of American history!"¹

As Jenifer suggests, the history of nineteenth-century America cannot be told without reference to the slavery controversy and what was later called the "negro problem," nor can the history of African Americans be told without reference to Douglass's writings. Douglass participated in major phases of the struggle for black freedom: the growth of abolitionism from a radical fringe group to a powerful reform movement; the national crisis that erupted over chattel bondage following the Fugitive Slave Law of 1850; the Civil War and its culmination in the emancipation of all slaves; the heady days of Reconstruction and its tragic decline into segregation and terrorism. To those who think that the history of race relations in America is one of consistent and perhaps inevitable improvement over time, Douglass's life shows that the struggle for civil rights is full of dramatic victories and discouraging setbacks alike. In his fifty years as a public figure, Douglass saw the legal status of African Americans change from property with no rights that whites were bound to respect, to citizens equally protected under the law (at least in theory), to a caste suffering from widespread racism and lynching (and who were infamously defined as "separate but equal" one year after Douglass's death in the US Supreme Court case *Plessy v. Ferguson*). As the

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landscape of the civil rights struggle changed, so too did some of Douglass's positions and methods, though at the core of his work is an unwavering dedication to the fulfillment of democratic ideals.

Literary Forms

Douglass's main weapons in the fight for freedom were words, both spoken and written. At a time when oratory was second only to poetry as a respected literary form, Douglass was best known as a speaker of electrifying eloquence and charisma. Douglass also published three autobiographies, edited his own newspapers, authored a novella ("The Heroic Slave" [1853]), and even wrote a bit of verse. Equally impressive, the scope of his style is as broad as the generic range of his writings. In his introduction to Douglass's second autobiography, *My Bondage and My Freedom* (1855), the African American abolitionist James McCune Smith praised Douglass's "logic, wit, sarcasm, invective, pathos, and bold imagery" (MB 134), while the black intellectual Alexander Crummell compared his "delicate, beauteous, poetic sentiment" to the lyricism of William Wordsworth.² For a sense of Douglass's protean styles and influences, one can refer to very different examples: the sentimental, novelistic descriptions of his grandmother in the *Narrative* and *My Bondage and My Freedom*; the outraged irony and jeremiad intensity of his widely reprinted speech, "What to the Slave Is the Fourth of July?" (1852); the scholarly logic of his scientific oration, "The Claims of the Negro Ethnologically Considered" (1854); the black oral traditions such as slave songs and subversive humor that often echo in his speeches.

In addition to his linguistic genius and extraordinary ambition, one explanation for the range of Douglass's work is that his political efforts brought him into contact with a diverse array of listeners. Some of the audiences of his speeches were segregated by gender and race, while others were what the period called "promiscuous" – mixed and therefore especially challenging. Douglass also contended with skeptical listeners, particularly early in his career when foes and even friends resented so articulate, brilliant, and independent an ex-slave. Unlike writers who published but did not speak, Douglass did not simply imagine the demands of his various listeners: he faced them repeatedly during five decades of orating in which he was lauded, jeered, and even physically attacked (in fact, his hand was permanently damaged from fighting-off a mob during one of his speeches).

As for his writing, Douglass's journalistic work prompted frequent and immediate replies from readers, and Douglass often responded in print to the most hostile critiques of his editorials. Douglass's autobiographies came under much scrutiny, especially the *Narrative*, whose authorship and factual

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accuracy became subjects of debate – in part because Douglass was so polished a writer, and also because other slave narratives had been shown to be ghostwritten or fabricated. Considering the hundreds of speeches that Douglass gave throughout Great Britain and the United States, and given the intense intertextual dynamics of racial debates in nineteenth-century transatlantic print culture, it makes sense that Douglass learned to present his views in multiple registers, to transform his literary voice so as to move as many listeners as possible.

Intellectual Traditions

A similar logic of transformation applies to Douglass's generous intellectual commitments. Douglass wrote of slavery in an 1860 letter, "There is scarcely one single interest, social, moral, religious, or physical[,] which is not in some way connected with this stupendous evil" (LW 2:488). And in his third autobiography, *Life and Times of Frederick Douglass* (1881, 1892), he wrote that in order to address the race problem comprehensively, "I should be profoundly versed in psychology, anthropology, ethnology, sociology, theology, biology, and all the other ologies, philosophies and sciences" (LT 939). Douglass was being only partly hyperbolic, for the topic of race in the nineteenth century cut across disciplinary boundaries during a period when modern academic fields were becoming increasingly defined. We do not know the full extent of Douglass's reading: he was largely self-taught, left no explicit record of his studies, and his personal papers and library were destroyed in a fire in 1872. Nonetheless, his speeches and writings reflect an ongoing process of intellectual growth as he continued his self-education in (among other things) history, philosophy, literature, natural science, and law. Benjamin Quarles, the first scholarly biographer of Douglass, called him a "many-sided man" with a "multiplicity of interests," though Quarles also regarded Douglass's learning as "broad rather than deep."³

It is true that Douglass was not a scholar but a reformer fighting on many fronts. As much as he respected specialized learning, he also emphasized the value of common sense and the practical consequences of ideas. Speaking about the death of Abraham Lincoln, a figure Douglass knew and a fellow leader whose wisdom transcended academic knowledge, Douglass claimed, "[M]ost men are taught by events" and "have little time to give to theories" (FDP 4:108). Douglass recognized early in his life that questions of racial justice cannot be reduced to philosophical abstractions or single areas of study. As a thinker who in many ways anticipated cultural pluralism and its current incarnation, multiculturalism, Douglass knew that contributions from diverse perspectives are required in the ongoing pursuit of freedom.

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Accordingly, his multifaceted career invites studies such as the volume at hand. Douglass even models for those who read him a kind of interdisciplinary approach.

Scholarly Contexts

The history of Douglass's critical reception is itself a narrative of transformations. In some ways, the first important studies of Douglass came from Douglass himself, if only because he published his life story three times (four if one counts the expanded version of his *Life and Times*). Anticipating the potential skepticism of his readers, Douglass included many supporting facts in his autobiographies, even in the *Narrative* – a risky decision in that Douglass was still a fugitive slave subject to capture and rendition. Douglass's autobiographies are always personal in their perspective and voice, but they increasingly resemble the “great man” histories of the nineteenth century as they become less psychologically immediate and more focused on public events. Part of the brilliance of Douglass's self-presentations was how skillfully he controlled his public image so as to preclude potential attacks. Douglass was adept at anticipating objections, defending weaknesses in his argument, and appealing to the democratic and Christian ideals of nineteenth-century United States culture. Yet if Douglass wrote his life into history, his legacy has proven to be far from assured.

Scholarship on Douglass in the fifty years after his death is relatively scant and uneven when judged by modern standards. Histories of the United States from the time tended to simplify or elide the experiences of blacks, in part because many post-Reconstruction Americans wanted to forget painful problems of race as sectional reconciliation and white solidarity proceeded at the expense of civil rights.⁴ This is not to say that Douglass was forgotten. As is still the case today, he was the subject of books for students and lay readers, while general works of African American history such as John Cromwell's *The Negro in American History* (1914) and Carter G. Woodson's *The Negro in Our History* (1922) included sketches of Douglass's life. Such books, however, are mainly interested in overarching historical narratives, and – like early popular biographies of Douglass by the African American writer Charles Chesnutt and black leader Booker T. Washington (who probably used a ghostwriter) – they draw so heavily on Douglass's autobiographies as to be more hagiography than history.

It is as if Douglass told his life story so well that no one made the effort to examine it critically, a situation exacerbated by the fact that Douglass's vast writings were not collected until the mid-twentieth century. Vernon Loggins's literary history *The Negro Author* (1931) was the first book to examine

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Douglass's oratory, journalism, and correspondence alongside his autobiographies. But even as Loggins emphasized the need for a scholarly edition of Douglass's writings, he felt that "such a collection will in all probability never be possible."⁵ Loggins was correct that some of Douglass's works are almost surely lost forever, not only because editions of his newspapers remain missing due in part to the 1872 fire, but also because many of his speeches do not survive or only exist in transcripts hastily scrawled by journalists attending the event. However, Loggins was wrong about the possibility of a scholarly collection. A turning point in Douglass studies came in 1950 when Philip Foner addressed what he later called the "deplorable" state of Douglass historiography by publishing the first volume of *Life and Writings of Frederick Douglass*, a selection of Douglass's speeches, articles, and correspondence that would eventually reach five volumes.⁶ Foner's work helped bring to light the dynamism and diversity of Douglass's thinking; and along with Quarles's 1948 biography, it encouraged scholars to look beyond the Douglass presented in the autobiographies.

Another important aspect of early Douglass scholarship is a tradition of literary criticism that Loggins both drew from and advanced. Initially, studies of Douglass tended to focus on his oratorical skills, a topic that was much debated during Douglass's life. As always, Douglass sought to shape the discussion of his work: *My Bondage and My Freedom* includes McCune Smith's lengthy praise of Douglass's oratory, while selections from Douglass's speeches appear in the appendix of the book. Newspaper accounts of Douglass's oratory often commented on his performance and style. And fitting for a man whose life was changed by reading Caleb Bingham's *Columbian Orator* (1797), Douglass appeared frequently in anthologies of speeches – from C. M. Whitman's compendium *American Orators and Oratory* (1883) to early twentieth-century textbooks edited by such notable literary figures as Julia Ward Howe, Thomas Wentworth Higginson, Alice Dunbar-Nelson, and Chesnutt. Benjamin Brawley's *The Negro in Literature and Art* (1910) also focused on Douglass's speeches, while two early biographies – Frederic May Holland's *Frederick Douglass, the Colored Orator* (1891) and James M. Gregory's *Frederick Douglass the Orator* (1893) – further indicate how closely Douglass was associated with the art of speech.

In the early twentieth century, Douglass was still far from receiving the kind of literary attention afforded to contemporary white writers such as Emerson, Hawthorne, and Longfellow. And by the mid-twentieth century, Douglass's place in American literary history was even less prominent. As many critics have noted, one reason for this is that an increasingly professionalized literary establishment created an exclusionary canon that tended to privilege formal unity over sociopolitical content.⁷ F. O. Matthiessen's

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definitive *American Renaissance* (1941) never mentions Douglass, despite the fact that many of Matthiessen's subjects (including Emerson, Thoreau, Melville, and Whitman) share ideological, aesthetic, and in some cases personal connections with Douglass. Other scholarly works from the period by Van Wyck Brooks, Vernon Parrington, and R. W. B. Lewis similarly ignore Douglass's achievements, even in chapters on antislavery literature and antebellum politics. Little suggests that Douglass was intentionally excluded on account of his race, but it is difficult to deny a conclusion that Douglass himself painfully learned: though eloquence and truth may have no color, race matters in how black writers are read – or not read.

Another reason for Douglass's waning literary reputation in the mid-twentieth century has more to do with genre than racial discrimination as literary criticism moved away from oratory as a primary object of study. *The New Negro* (1925), an influential Harlem Renaissance collection edited by the black intellectual Alain Locke, includes sections on African American poetry, fiction, drama, and music but has little interest in the oratorical forms for which Douglass had been most celebrated. William Stanley Braithwaite's contribution to *The New Negro*, "The Negro in Art and Literature," even goes so far as to devalue Douglass's autobiographies: "Frederick Douglass's story of his life is eloquent as a human document, but not in the graces of narration and psychologic portraiture." Braithwaite takes Douglass as an example of how "the race problem ... dissipated the literary energy of many able Negro writers," showing that white critics were not alone in attempting to separate aesthetics and politics at the expense of authors like Douglass.⁸ Loggins's 1931 book and J. Saunders Redding's *To Make a Poet Black* (1939) are more complimentary of Douglass's autobiographies. But even when they treat his writings as literary texts (and not solely as historical documents), their discussions remain relatively unsophisticated when compared with later scholarship.

A radical change in the literary reputation of Douglass began in the 1970s with the rise of black studies programs and political approaches to literary interpretation. No single scholar or text can be said to have instigated the renaissance of Douglass studies. Important essays on Douglass appear in collections on African American literature edited by Dexter Fisher and Robert Stepto, as well as by Deborah McDowell and Arnold Rampersad. Henry Louis Gates, Jr.'s *Figures in Black* (1987) includes two influential chapters on Douglass and also acknowledges three previous projects that helped clear the way for understanding Douglass as a writer of immense linguistic complexity: Peter Walker's *Moral Choices* (1978), Dickson Preston's *Young Frederick Douglass* (1980), and John Blassingame's introduction to *The Frederick Douglass Papers* (an ongoing, multivolume project

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begun in 1979 that, under the current direction of John McKivigan, is superseding Foner's *Life and Writings* as the authoritative source of Douglass's work). As a result of these and other efforts, Douglass's autobiographies, particularly the *Narrative*, came to eclipse his oratory, especially as scholars turned their attention to the slave narrative tradition, most notably examined in William Andrews's *To Tell a Free Story* (1986).

Theoretical advances in literary studies also shaped readings of Douglass's texts as scholars drew on Marxist, psychological, feminist, new historical, and post-structural methods. Widely considered during his life a representative of his race, Douglass by the end of the 1980s had become an author representative of much more – the slave narrative genre, African American literature in general, multicultural interpretation, and the politics of canon revision. At the same time that William McFeely's 1991 biography confirmed Douglass as a major historical figure, Douglass's prominence in literary studies culminated in two essay collections that brought together a host of influential scholars: Eric Sundquist's *Frederick Douglass: New Literary and Historical Essays* (1990) and Andrews's *Critical Essays on Frederick Douglass* (1991). No longer an occasionally studied orator or a purely historical subject, Douglass within a century of his death had become a canonical writer whose *Narrative* brought him into the highest ranks of United States literary history.

The last two decades have further secured and expanded Douglass's reputation to a point where Douglass scholarship reflects his diversity so well as to escape easy generalizations. The *Narrative* continues to be examined from generic, rhetorical, and psychological perspectives, while racial identity, political ideology, and linguistic mastery remain important foci. At the same time, some critics now consider *My Bondage and My Freedom* to be Douglass's most telling life story, if only because a more autonomous, more experienced Douglass directly addresses such controversial subjects as racism in the North (and the antislavery movement), black political power, and violent resistance. *Life and Times of Frederick Douglass* is still the least read of Douglass's autobiographies, though Douglass's role in the Civil War and Reconstruction is beginning to receive needed discussion, especially as critics challenge the notion that important literature was not written during the Civil War. Renewed interest in oratory, not simply as a literary form but as an influential cultural practice, has returned Douglass to his standing as a speaker, while growing interest in African American print culture, spurred in part by access to the nineteenth-century black press through internet databases, has brought new attention to Douglass's important editorial work.

More than ever before, *all* of Douglass's writings seem deserving of serious study, often requiring scholars to engage in interdisciplinary work. Douglass

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has been increasingly situated within new intellectual contexts, including nineteenth-century legal history and theory, racial science, and philosophical traditions (political, moral, and metaphysical). The recent turn toward religion in nineteenth-century studies has made Douglass's complicated views of Christianity especially compelling, while the continuing integration of African American and women writers with authors from the "old" canon puts Douglass in significant conversations with Romanticism and sentimentality. Perhaps most importantly, the paradigm shift toward transnationalism in United States literary studies has both advanced and been advanced by recent work on Douglass, whose life and interests cannot be kept within the borders of the United States, particularly given the international routes of slavery, abolitionism, and imperialism.

As with many great writers, Douglass is enriched – not diminished or excluded – by changing critical priorities. His wide-ranging commitments and modes of expression continue to make him the most important black writer of the nineteenth century, even if his representative status is rightfully fading away as critics recognize that no single voice can encompass the diversity of nineteenth-century African American texts. But while Douglass is neither a metonymic figure nor the leader of a monolithic tradition, he remains at the center of many recent scholarly developments. Our understanding of Douglass's life and writings is still – and will remain – in a process of change. *The Cambridge Companion to Frederick Douglass* seeks to describe and advance such transformation.

Overview of Chapters

The following chapters need not be read in order, but they tend to move from general to more specific topics, and they take a roughly chronological shape. In chapter 1, "Douglass's Self-Making and the Culture of Abolitionism," John Stauffer examines a fundamental background for Douglass's life and work – his experiences within the abolitionist movement in the United States and Great Britain. Focusing on the complicated dynamics between various strands of antislavery activism – and, accordingly, between Douglass and his closest associates and friends – Stauffer discusses the personal and political contexts for Douglass's major achievements.

Moving from history to issues of genre and text, Robert S. Levine in chapter 2 discusses how Douglass artistically shaped his public and private identity through his autobiographical writings. As much as Douglass sought a stable selfhood in the face of racist practices that would deny him an identity, Levine shows how Douglass was "constantly in the process of reinventing himself."

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Rhetorically, politically, and psychologically complex, Douglass's autobiographies and the changes they register justify their longstanding centrality in the study of Douglass.

In chapter 3, "Douglass as Orator and Editor," Sarah Meer argues that Douglass's reputation need not rest solely on his autobiographical work. For Meer, Douglass's efforts as a lecturer and journalist are inextricably linked in a national and international public sphere increasingly connected by technological advances and the growing desire for news. Taking "What to the Slave Is the Fourth of July?" as a main case study, Meer shows that Douglass's celebrated speech does not simply reflect his exceptional oratorical genius; it also draws on a fully elaborated tradition in the antislavery press of taking Independence Day as an occasion to attack the hypocrisy of American slavery.

Chapters 4 and 5 discuss the intersection of religion and politics in Douglass's work. Using materials from throughout the career, John Ernest in "Crisis and Faith in Douglass's Work" addresses Douglass's "increasingly complex and sometimes inscrutable views on religion." While Douglass is often taken to be skeptical of religion and increasingly secular in his thinking, Ernest argues that Douglass was "a religious leader not in spite of the ongoing crisis he experienced but because of it." In "Violence, Manhood, and War in Douglass," Maurice Wallace agrees with Ernest that Douglass does not turn toward secularism in any complete sense. For Wallace, Douglass's growing militancy, most forcibly represented in his discussions of John Brown, can be understood as a "muscular Christian militancy" that waxes with the Civil War but has deep roots in Douglass's private and public life.

Chapters 6 through 8 situate Douglass within three related intellectual contexts, all of which generally address the question: how does one know – and more importantly, convince others – that slavery is wrong? In "Human Law and Higher Law," Gregg Crane describes the legal landscape of the slavery debate, aligning Douglass with such higher law advocates as William Seward and Thoreau. Crane argues that Douglass, particularly in his writings on the Constitution, "insisted that American law must be founded on universal ethical norms" best established, not through religious conviction, but through "political dialogue and public consensus." Arthur Riss in chapter seven, "Sentimental Douglass," offers a somewhat different sense of the principles of Douglass's abolitionism. For Riss, Douglass does not simply deploy sentimental discourses of sympathy, home, and family to achieve his political goals. More radically, Douglass represents sentimentality as "an enabling condition rather than merely a representational mode" in that the very notion of loving human relations is unthinkable for the subject in bondage. In chapter eight, "Douglass among the Romantics," the philosopher