Introduction

"To Tell the Truth": African American Activism in the British Isles 1835–1895

Before departing for America in the spring of 1847, formerly enslaved African American activist Frederick Douglass addressed an "overflowing" audience in Leicester, England. In a well-rehearsed opening, he claimed he "had nothing in the way of learning" to entice the crowd's interest apart from, as emphasized by the newspaper correspondent, "A LONG EXPERIENCE OF SLAVERY." Douglass went on to say:

> A slave was looked upon in that free country [the United States] as a piece of property, to be bought and sold, and to be hunted down by blood-hounds if he made his escape. – I have myself (said the speaker, after a momentary pause,) experienced the anxiety and trepidation consequent on this state of things; for I am, as I believe most of you are aware, A RUNAWAY SLAVE.[1]

While some of his speeches in Britain were extemporaneous, Douglass relied on distinct performative techniques to convince the transatlantic public of southern brutality. In doing so, his blistering oratorical artistry amazed audiences, who awaited his every word with bated breath: his rhetoric, sonorous voice and command of the lecturing platform painted a picture of slavery like no other. His testimony as a fugitive added weight to his words, and he combined such techniques with a flair for the dramatic, adding – as we see here – a "momentary pause" to infuse his words with impact and anticipation. Despite his protestations (which were included purely for dramatic effect), Douglass was far from being an amateur public speaker. Even if his oratorical career had begun in Britain when he arrived in 1845, he had lectured roughly 300 times by

[1] *Leicestershire Mercury*, March 6, 1847, 2. Emphasis in original.

1847. Douglass's sojourn increased his confidence, independence and celebrity within transatlantic abolitionist circles, and it became a stepping-stone for future success in the United States. He was the most successful Black transatlantic activist of the nineteenth century and contemporaries lavishly described him as an eloquent orator, a modern Demosthenes.[2]

The story of the transatlantic abolitionist movement is an extraordinary one. Scores of Black activists such as Frederick Douglass traveled to England, Ireland, Scotland and even parts of rural Wales during the nineteenth century to educate the British public on slavery. Many individuals sought temporary reprieve from American soil, others permanent; some raised money to free themselves or enslaved family members; and others sought work with varying degrees of success. Black women and men lectured in large cities and tiny fishing villages, wrote and published narratives, stayed with influential reformers, and appealed to different classes, races, and genders, with no discrimination against profession, religion, or age. Whatever their reasons for visiting, Black abolitionists exhibited whips and chains, sometimes together with their scars; read runaway slave advertisements from southern newspapers; created visual panoramas; and used fiery rhetoric to tell their stories.[3]

During this period, millions of British and Irish people witnessed formerly enslaved people lecture. They vociferously read about their lives through slave narratives or pamphlets, watched antislavery panoramas unfold, purchased daguerreotypes, and raised money to free enslaved individuals and their families. Activists inspired poetry, songs, woodcuts, pamphlets, children's literature, wax models, religious remonstrances, along with hundreds of editorials and letters to the press. In response, Victorian press correspondents endlessly commented on Black abolitionist lecturers, their appearance, their diction, and most importantly, their authenticity. While the public displayed a distinct racial curiosity and flocked to churches, taverns, and town halls in order to glimpse or even touch a formerly enslaved individual, many were inspired by activist voices and genuinely gave what they could to the antislavery cause. As the pioneering historian Richard Blackett has noted, Black activists brought

[2] *Dundee, Perth and Cupar Advertiser*, February 3, 1860, 2.

[3] Audrey Fisch, *American Slaves in Victorian England: Abolitionist Politics in Popular Literature and Culture* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 1–10. See also Manisha Sinha, *The Slave's Cause: A History of Abolition* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2016) and Richard J. M. Blackett, *Building an Antislavery Wall* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1983).

"a legitimacy to the international movement that their white co-workers could never claim." They did not encourage armed conflict or political interference, as some of their opponents alleged, but instead "aimed to inform the British public about the nature of American slavery." It is therefore unsurprising that British newspaper editors littered their reportage with accounts of formerly enslaved individuals as well as their speeches, adverts for their narratives, and their letters to editors. From the *John O'Groat Journal* to the *Royal Cornwall Gazette*, Victorian Britons followed the movements of Black Americans from the 1830s until decades after the American Civil War, often cramming into tiny churches or town halls to curb an insatiable appetite for details about American slavery.[4]

By sharing their oratorical, visual, and literary testimonies to transatlantic audiences, African American activists were soldiers in the fight for liberty, as a result, their journeys were inevitably and inescapably radical. Their politicized messages and appeals for freedom had severe consequences for enslavers, proslavery defenders, white racists, and ignorant publics: the act of traversing the Atlantic itself highlighted not only their death-defying escapes from bondage but also their desire to speak out against slavery and white supremacy on foreign soil. In August 1846, Frederick Douglass declared that

> so long as the slave clinks his chains in bondage, while he lifts up his imploring hands to heaven, and the advocates of freedom everywhere are doing their utmost in his behalf, in exposing his wrongs, and making known the outrages under which he suffers, while I see this, I cannot do other than pursue the course which I am now doing.[5]

Douglass' position as a formerly enslaved individual made it impossible for him to follow any other course of action: it was his *duty* to travel to the other side of the Atlantic and share his blistering rhetoric in the hope it would be amplified and reverberated back to the United States. As he declared a month later, "no man would dare to rise up . . . and say he had not had cause to speak warmly" on the subject.[6] Douglass and other

[4] Blackett (1983), 195–197. See also Peter Ripley (ed.), *The Black Abolitionist Papers, Vol. 1: The British Isles 1830–1865* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1985); Clare Taylor, *British and American Abolitionists: An Episode in Transatlantic Understanding* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1974); Fisch (2000); Douglas A. Lorimer, *Colour, Class and the Victorians: English Attitudes to the Negro in the Mid Nineteenth Century* (Leicester: Holmes and Meier Publishers Inc., 1978); Sinha (2016).

[5] *The Newcastle Guardian*, August 8, 1846, 2–3.

[6] *The Bristol Mercury, and Western Counties Advertiser*, September 5, 1846, 6.

advocates of freedom traveled extensively around the British Isles to convince the transatlantic public of slavery's horrors, and in doing so, they dared their audiences to challenge their experiences, facts, perspectives, or arguments; they were the expert witnesses since they had worn the shackles of bondage themselves. While representing and advocating for the voiceless and silent millions who toiled in slavery, women and men spoke tirelessly to numerous audiences, despite the trauma on their scarred hearts, bodies, minds, and souls. What was the cost of such a burden? How did they navigate their own liberties when, to white Victorian audiences, they represented a suffering and tortured slave? Day after day, night after night, formerly enslaved individuals relived their trauma for hours on end, in urgent and emotional appeals to encourage antislavery momentum. They believed that speaking abroad would have a very real and positive impact on the abolitionist movement, and for some, such as Douglass, this was the only option they had: as Moses Roper summarized in 1839, "I would lay down my life to save them [the enslaved], but I dare not put my foot on American ground: – I should be dragged in chains to an ignominious and cruel death."[7] Those who knew the true value of freedom were its best advocates, and radical figures like Roper were unafraid to resist, speak out, and die for the cause.

The constant movement and exchange of Black peoples across the Atlantic famously led Paul Gilroy to conclude that scholars must study the "Black Atlantic" as a separate hybrid entity, and they should acknowledge its role in the influence of Black self-fashioning strategies. Black activists visited Europe "and had their perceptions of America and racial domination shifted as a result of their experiences there," which "has important consequences for their understanding of racial identities." While this book concentrates only on the movement of African Americans to the British Isles, many individuals used the nation as a base to visit France, Italy, Greece, Egypt, and other parts of Africa to campaign against slavery or reconnect with their ancestral land.[8]

During their transatlantic journeys to Britain throughout the nineteenth century, African Americans engaged in what I term "adaptive resistance," a multifaceted interventionist strategy by which they challenged white supremacy and won support for abolition. They

[7] *Royal Cornwall Gazette*, February 15, 1839, 2–6, 15–19.
[8] Paul Gilroy, *The Black Atlantic: Modernity and Double Consciousness* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1995).

self-consciously performed in contested public spaces, intruded into a white supremacist narrative, and unsettled Victorian concepts of Blackness, race, and slavery. Alongside this mode of self-presentation in sources I have excavated from Victorian newspapers, I use an interdisciplinary methodology that draws on literary studies, cultural history, memory studies, African American studies, and the visual culture of antislavery iconography to (re)discover Black performative strategies on the Victorian stage from the late 1830s to the mid-1890s. With their blazing rhetoric, violent descriptions of slavery, panoramas, plays. or props, individuals such as Moses Roper, Frederick Douglass, William and Ellen Craft, Henry "Box" Brown, John Sella Martin, Josiah Henson, and Ida B. Wells countered racial stereotypes that people of African descent were inferior to whites. The term "adaptive" is key to this resistance strategy, since Black Americans actively created new relationships or means to "adapt" to the Victorian stage. It encompassed the sheer extent of individual actions, their (sometimes improvised) reactions to racism and white supremacy, and their myriad performative techniques that depended on specificity in regard to location, audience, and contemporary events.

However, in the analysis of such strategies, it is abundantly clear that performance was only one strand in the Black activist arsenal. The successful employment of adaptive resistance relied on a triad of

1. adaptive performance techniques,
2. utilization of abolitionist networks, and
3. exploitation of Victorian print culture.

Building upon the groundbreaking work by Audrey Fisch, Richard Blackett, and Peter Ripley, this book identifies and unifies these themes as central to Black abolitionist transatlantic visits and concludes that if an individual ensured an even balance between all three strategies, it was likely their sojourn would be successful. To share their testimony of slavery, Black women and men "adapted" to the location and the sociopolitical climate in which they spoke in. Intervening within these white public spaces, they used their *performances* to subvert white dominance and refused to exploit themselves as spectacles or objects for white consumption. To maximize their message, they befriended newspaper editors, organized the printing of narratives or pamphlets that recorded their speeches, and manipulated connections with Victorian *print culture* to enable favorable coverage of their lectures. They wrote letters to influential newspapers and in their speeches thanked publications for

their support of the antislavery cause. Synonymous with this, they utilized as many white and Black abolitionist *networks* as they could: American abolitionist William Lloyd Garrison's British supporters were often friendly with local newspaper editors, and activists relied on these men and women to publish their stories, print advertisements for their meetings, and accommodate them whenever they visited certain locations. White abolitionists introduced formerly enslaved individuals to their families and friends, and arranged transportation, dinners, and social events. Most prominently, they ensured that audiences packed out lecture halls. While these abolitionist networks or links to print culture could not be exploited by every activist (indeed, some white networks deliberately sabotaged missions), Black women and men used or created every opportunity to maintain antislavery momentum and encourage support for abolition.[9] More often than not, Black abolitionists exploited one or two strands of adaptive resistance to achieve moderate success on the stage and in the press. By studying Moses Roper and his radical dissonance, for example, we can understand why Frederick Douglass was so successful. Douglass was a skillful performer who could answer criticisms or compromise his graphic language with relative ease. When he was maligned in the press, he used his own rhetoric and friendships with white activists that he had cultivated through Garrisonian networks to ensure any form of sabotage was met with indignation. Roper could not exploit print culture or abolitionist networks to the same capacity as Douglass. He refused to downplay his brutal descriptions of slavery to satisfy white expectations, and, as a result, upset Victorian standards of gentility and racial dynamics. He also suffered after prominent British aristocrats slandered his reputation in the newspapers, which discredited his testimony and subsequently his tour.[10]

Hence, in this book, I uncover new evidence surrounding Black activist performances and shed new light on their rhetoric and actions both on and outside an abolitionist stage.[11] As Audrey Fisch notes in her

[9] This will be discussed in detail in Chapters 2 and 3. See also Caleb McDaniel, *The Problem of Democracy in the Age of Slavery: Garrisonian Abolitionists and Transatlantic Reform* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana University Press, 2013) and Blackett (1983).

[10] *Manchester Daily Mirror*, January 23, 1852, 2.

[11] In doing so, I build on the pioneering work of Fisch (2000); Blackett (1983); Ripley (1985). See also Fionnghuala Sweeney, *Frederick Douglass and the Atlantic World* (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2007); Alan J. Rice and Martin Crawford, *Liberating Sojourn: Frederick Douglass and Transatlantic Reform* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1999); Sinha (2016).

monumental study, *American Slaves in Victorian England*, there was a distinct "Afro-American campaign" between 1850 and 1861. Blackett too makes reference to a protest tradition where Black abolitionists wanted to create a "moral cordon around America that would isolate her from international feeling."[12] I shift focus and point to the ways in which Moses Roper contributed to and nurtured a transatlantic Black American protest tradition in Britain before the visits of Charles Remond and Frederick Douglass in the early 1840s. I also extend my study to focus on Black abolitionist visits beyond the American Civil War, and theorize that through their employment of adaptive resistance, Black activists maintained a growing abolitionist momentum and refused to let the British public forget that the legacies of slavery haunted them still.

Adaptive resistance was, then, a specifically *British* approach not only because of the nature of British abolitionist groups but also because activists used their position abroad as a distinct political ploy to challenge slavery. By amplifying their accounts of oppression on foreign soil, activists used their politicized testimony to shame enslavers and proslavery defenders, which gave their resistance an international dimension. Britain's history of abolition and its intertwined narrative of moral superiority also allowed Black women and men to simultaneously praise Britons for their abolitionist efforts, as well as challenge what further action the nation should take in regard to American slavery. While Black abolitionists could exploit the elements of adaptive resistance on American soil, the antislavery climate was inherently different and more complex. Activism in America was often mortally dangerous for formerly enslaved individuals. The ability to establish antislavery networks was sometimes hindered by this fact, and most successful connections between abolitionists were exploited in the northern states. In Britain and Ireland, activists could exploit and actually combine performance, print culture and international networks from their positions abroad: in doing so, some chose to stay for months, years, or even the rest of their lives in order to escape slave catchers, racial violence, or domestic terrorism. Even if Black abolitionists received criticism or experienced racism in the British Isles, it was rare that they were mobbed, threatened, or assaulted during the course of their activism. Ready audiences awaited them there, and they provided Black activists with support, money, and extensive coverage in national newspapers. Activists distributed this coverage, and

[12] Fisch (2000), 5; Blackett (1983), 6.

sent it to American newspapers to maximize their success. In America, slavery was an entrenched institution in politics, the economy, society, and culture; the lack of a supportive provincial and especially national press hindered the ability to make a national impact, at least when compared to the success of these activists in the British Isles. In turn, activist performances in Britain and Ireland were designed to, in some respects, "preach to the converted": antislavery sentiment was woven into the national and patriotic fabric of the British Isles, and most people did or could not publicly denounce abolition in as blatant terms as the United States. Thus, Black anglophilia was much more pronounced in the British Isles, simply because of its political climate, antislavery history, and physical distance from America.[13]

Leading on from this, how can we determine the success of African American missions to the British Isles? Their lectures raised awareness of American slavery, maintained antislavery momentum throughout the nineteenth century, changed attitudes toward Black people and the South, inspired British and Irish people to become activists, and persuaded thousands to rally against the Confederacy, a possible factor in Britain's contested neutrality. More specifically, though, Black abolitionists sought tangible outcomes from their visits abroad such as raising money for a specific antislavery society or freeing an enslaved family member. They accomplished such missions relatively easily, and their success can therefore be tangibly measured. However, for Black abolitionists more broadly, how should the success be estimated? By the amount of money raised for transatlantic antislavery societies, the attendance at abolitionist meetings, the number of slave narratives or pamphlets sold, or the number of lectures given by activists? Richard Blackett's groundbreaking work *Building an Antislavery Wall* defines success by the scale and number of lecture tours, but we cannot "measure the success of these efforts, except to say that at the outbreak of the Civil War the British public was knowledgeable about the nature of American slavery and that each belligerent in the conflict desperately sought to influence British opinion in its favor."[14] If we take attendance or frequency of lectures as a basis, then it leaves us in no doubt that Black abolitionists were extremely successful: it is no exaggeration to say they spoke to millions of people across the nineteenth century, reaching thousands more through the publication and sale of their narratives. The extensive and enormous

[13] See Sinha (2016) for a brilliant analysis of abolition and the lives of Black abolitionists.
[14] Blackett (1983), xi, 16–17.

coverage of their lectures in the Victorian press indicated their impact on British and Irish society.[15]

In 1930, W. E. B. Du Bois wrote that he was disappointed to learn many African Americans thought that "unless [a] protest is successful or seems to have a reasonable chance of success, it is worse than worthless." He wrote that protest was always successful if one had stood their ground and shown the enemy their position: "Even if the offending politician does not hear of your opposition; does not feel your lone vote, you know and you feel, and it is an awful thing to have to be ashamed of one's self."[16] As formerly enslaved individuals, the act of escaping slavery represented an extraordinary act of resistance in the face of a violent and oppressive white supremacist system. Their survival was a form of revenge against their former enslavers, but this was not enough: Black abolitionists, as advocates of freedom, traveled abroad to embarrass, shame, and, most importantly, condemn proslavery defenders from an international stage. The British Isles gave them a platform, pulpit, and an amplifier through the Victorian press. With every word they uttered or action they took on British and Irish soil, Black women and men contested white supremacy and the racist stereotypes placed upon them, intervening into a white transatlantic society to share their testimony.

Thus, while I recognize the success of Black abolitionists more *broadly*, this book examines certain *individual* successes in more detail. Within the theoretical framework of adaptive resistance, success rested on the ability for a Black abolitionist to maximize their antislavery message and receive extensive reportage in the Victorian press. Thus, newspaper coverage can be used in part to measure success: activists could use this mode of print culture to amplify their voices, their words, and their performances as a whole. Their definition of success rested on the exploitation of the three strands of adaptive resistance to *gather*, *build*, and *maintain* antislavery momentum, even in places where they had not physically visited. In doing so, they could shape and change narratives surrounding slavery and its legacies, raise public awareness, and ultimately alter the racialized perception of themselves. Through the creation of unique performances, the establishment of connections with influential people, and the manipulation of print culture (specifically the

[15] Author's website, www.frederickdouglassinbritain.com.
[16] John Stauffer, "Foreword," in Zoe Trodd (ed.), *American Protest Literature* (Cambridge: Belknap University Press, 2008), xvi.

Victorian press), abolitionists could thus advance the antislavery cause as well as establish fame on the British circuit.

Taking their resistance efforts together, then, Black activists visited nearly every corner of Britain. They transformed transatlantic abolitionism and emphasized the importance of Black testimony in every speech, letter, or action. Written and portrayed in popular culture as subservient or passive figures, activists transformed their Black bodies into sites of protest. Layering such protests upon their physical selves, they became embodied self-reflexive agents in order to disrupt racial norms and protest against attempts to render Black voices invisible. These activists were architects of subversion and challenged misconceptions of slavery and white obsession with the Black corporeal. They played on preconceived notions and spoke eloquently to win their audience to the cause of abolition. Their reactive and proactive agency rejected racial stereotypes and constantly pushed at the boundaries of identity.

Through the employment of such tactics, Black women and men forged a Black American protest tradition in Britain. Sustained by bold testimony, they wanted, in Moses Roper's words, to "tell the truth" about the violence of slavery and champion African American humanity.[17] Roper's declaration was a foundation upon which future African Americans would build. In 1847, Douglass declared that enslavers could no longer hide what slavery truly was, for "the slave now broke loose from his chains and went forth to tell his own story, and to make known the wrongs of his brethren."[18] In 1850, William Wells Brown argued it was right and "proper that some one should speak in favour of the slave," and, instead of relying on slaveholder's testimony, he decided "to send his own representative, one who had himself worn the chains of slavery."[19] In 1853, Turner Williams argued that "he had been twenty years a slave, and therefore ought to know something about slavery and slave owners."[20] And in 1863, Julia Jackson declared it was her right "to make a few remarks on slavery" as she herself had witnessed it.[21] Black women

[17] Paul Walker, "Moses Roper: African American Baptist, Anti-Slavery Lecturer and Birmingham Nonconformity," *Baptist Quarterly*, 44 (April 2011), 102–106.
[18] Frederick Douglass, March 25, 1847, in John Blassingame (ed.), *The Frederick Douglass Papers: Series One – Speeches, Debates and Interviews, Vol. 2, 1847–54* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1982), 8–19.
[19] *The Leeds Mercury*, January 19, 1850, 7.
[20] *The Sheffield and Rotherham Independent*, July 16, 1853, 3.
[21] *Western Times*, January 30, 1863, 5.