Narrative Reversals and Power Exchanges: Frederick Douglass and British Culture

Paul Giles

American Literature, Volume 73, Number 4, December 2001, pp. 779-810 (Article)

Published by Duke University Press

For additional information about this article
http://muse.jhu.edu/journals/al/summary/v073/73.4giles.html
Within the last thirty years, Frederick Douglass’s first two autobiographies—*Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass* (1845) and *My Bondage and My Freedom* (1855)—have become canonical texts. One reason for this rapid institutionalization is that Douglass’s “cult of the self-made man” who triumphs over adversity dovetails with a much more traditional American ethic of individual virtue. As Joseph Fichtelberg has observed, Douglass appears to present himself as a kind of black Benjamin Franklin, an exemplar of heroic self-reliance, striving “to embody the millennial ideals of an America foretold in the Declaration of Independence.” My purpose in this essay is to problematize these critical homologies that yoke Douglass and an abstract idea of American nationalism by considering his two autobiographies in light of his engagement with British political culture. I will argue that the melodramatic representations of violence in the 1845 *Narrative* are reformulated in *My Bondage and My Freedom* by a textual dynamic of self-contradiction, which works deliberately to disrupt indigenous perspectives of all kinds. This dynamic can be linked to the impact on Douglass’s work of transnationalism, which he began to regard as a literary and discursive phenomenon as well as a social imperative. Nationalism for Douglass thus came to involve not so much a positive or universal ideal but, rather, a set of fluctuating contrary terms. I will argue, accordingly, that there is a correlation between Douglass’s aesthetic structures of ironic displacement and the epistemological paradoxes that frame his political career, such that his point of identification keeps shifting, and power is represented as a material commodity to be recycled and exchanged.
In the early nineteenth century, Britain enjoyed a reputation among American abolitionists as the world’s leading antislavery power. An alliance between British military forces and African Americans had formed during the Wars of Independence in the 1780s, when, out of its own strategic interest, Britain promised freedom to any rebellious slave who would rise up against the mutual enemy. Subsequently, leaders of the American reform movement came to venerate well-known British figures like William Wilberforce and Thomas Clarkson, whose influence helped to bring about the abolition of slavery in the British West Indies on 1 August 1834. This date is regularly commemorated in Douglass’s speeches and writings; in 1861, for example, shortly after the outbreak of the U.S. Civil War, Douglass looks back to what he calls this “sublime event . . . the one of all others most creditable to the age.” He goes on to express the hope that the U.S. sectarian conflict will have the effect of “breaking the chains of every American slave, and placing America side by side with noble old England in the glorious career of Liberty and Civilization.”

It was in “noble old England,” moreover, that much of the momentum behind William Lloyd Garrison’s abolitionist movement was generated during the 1830s and 1840s. Garrison first visited England in 1833, when he struck up a firm friendship with George Thompson, president of the British Anti-Slavery League, who himself crossed the Atlantic in 1835 to campaign in Boston. Garrison subsequently attended the International Antislavery Convention held in London in 1840 and returned to the country for a lecture tour in 1846. Indeed, despite various differences of opinion—notably over women antislavery delegates, to which the British were firmly opposed—Garrison at this time felt that his movement enjoyed more general support in Britain than back in the United States. “We owe Mr. Garrison our grateful homage,” remarked Douglass in 1857, “in that he was among the first of his countrymen who zealously applied the British argument for abolition, against American slavery.” As Douglass suggests, much of the impetus behind Garrison’s early success in the United States came from his visible association with British emancipationists who had recently secured their famous victory in the Caribbean. Douglass’s own hugely successful tour of Britain between 1845 and 1847 helped further disseminate antislavery principles among the British
public—he and Garrison traveled together for several months in 1846—and when the Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass appeared in 1845 it quickly went through nine English editions. Also influential in the cause of emancipation was the publication in 1842 of Charles Dickens’s American Notes, with its Gothic view of the South as characterized by “brutal lust, cruelty, and the abuse of irresponsible power.”

“I believe,” said Douglass in a speech at Paisley, Scotland, in 1846, “that the notice of Dickens had more effect in calling attention to the subject, than all the books published in America for ten years.” Douglass here flatters his audience, perhaps, by assuring them of the American “deference” toward British public opinion, as represented by “the writings of such men as Dickens, as well as by the public press.” Douglass also benefited quite directly from his two years in Britain, since it was his English friends, led by Ellen and Anna Richardson of Newcastle, who raised the funds to purchase his freedom from Hugh Auld of Maryland in 1847. This transaction caused a certain amount of controversy among U.S. abolitionists, many of whom maintained that it constituted an implicit recognition of the “right to traffic in human beings” and was therefore, by definition, immoral. For Douglass, however, this financial exchange was symptomatic of a more general shift in his political attitudes, which the time spent in Britain had helped to bring about: gradually, he came to think of the issues of slavery in pragmatic rather than apocalyptic terms. In London in 1846, he linked up with the Chartists William Lovett and Henry Vincent to launch publicly their new Anti-Slavery League, and the influence of Chartism can be detected behind the direction of North Star, the newspaper Douglass began to publish from Rochester on his return to the United States in 1847. The paper’s title echoes Feargus O’Connor’s Northern Star, the leading Chartist publication of its time, and, indeed, in his editorial columns Douglass specifically allies himself with the Chartists and calls enthusiastically for radical social reform.

Douglass was indebted also to the assistance of Julia Griffiths, an Englishwoman he had met on his British tour, who moved to Rochester in 1849 to manage the accounts of the North Star and to provide assistance for his cause in various practical ways. Although Griffiths was an extremely capable businesswoman, who quickly reduced the paper’s debt and doubled its subscription list, Garrison and his acolytes were as hostile to Douglass’s association with her as to his link
with the Chartists. In both cases, they saw a pernicious British influence deflecting his attention away from what they regarded as the spirit of moral perfectionism and Christian purity animating the abolitionist movement; Garrison, in fact, went so far as to call her a "double-and-twisted worker of iniquity."\(^{11}\) In truth, Griffiths was very much a political pragmatist whose intellectual agenda was cast in a familiar mould of English empiricism and stout common sense. After her return to England in 1855, she contributed a regular column, "Letters from the Old World," to \textit{Douglass' Monthly}, and here her themes revolve constantly around social activism and fundraising. "We are a practical people in dear, old England," she writes, "and judge a good deal of 'faith' by the works it brings forth."\(^{12}\) Commenting in 1862 on the progress of the Civil War, Griffiths evokes even more clearly what she sees as the virtues of gradualism and compromise:

> It is an old and trite saying 'that half a loaf is better than no bread.' President Lincoln and his party have done something to forward the onward march of freedom, although by no means as much as we could wish, and many who abuse his Government are ignorant of the fact, that he has abolished slavery in the District of Columbia.\(^{13}\)

Although Griffiths's column appeared nearly a decade after her close collaboration with Douglass in Rochester, it may not be too speculative to infer from its tone the marked influence that Griffiths exercised on Douglass in the early 1850s. His famous "change of opinion" on the U.S. Constitution, when he broke with the Garrison party by declaring that the Constitution "might be made consistent in its details with the noble purposes avowed in its preamble," was announced in May 1851; but when Douglass adds that this crucial shift in his political stance had "not been hastily arrived at," he is speaking the literal truth rather than just paying polite lip-service to his former mentor.\(^{14}\) Indeed, the first inklings of his new position appear in a \textit{North Star} essay of 16 March 1849, "The Constitution and Slavery," in which Douglass avers that the U.S. Constitution, if construed only in the light of its letter and without reference to the opinions of those who framed it, should not necessarily be seen as a proslavery instrument.\(^{15}\) Douglass's change of opinion, then, occurred within two years of his return to the United States from Britain—under the aegis of political influences about which Garrison and his friends were right to feel suspicious. Traditionally, Douglass's work is said to take a more nationalist
turn in the 1850s, with the writer seeking to forge for himself, as Eric Sundquist puts it, a “more sophisticated 'American' identity.” In fact, though, we can perceive here a curious series of reversals, whereby Douglass’s emerging patriotism is intellectually dependent on a reconceptualization of the slavery issue in transnational terms: it was the British political scene, rather than the spirit of American transcendentalism, that led him toward a reconciliation with the legal framework of the U.S. Constitution. It is true that abolition itself became more politicized in the United States during the 1850s, with Garrison’s newspaper, the *Liberator*, coming to seem increasingly old-fashioned in a decade of critical legal and political debates about the status of slavery. But it is also true, as we can observe from Douglass’s writing, that a sense of estrangement from American institutions impelled him intellectually and politically toward transnational perspectives in the middle part of his career. One might suggest, in fact, that Douglass began to deploy a transnational perspective in order to turn nationalism against itself, to demystify national identity as a reified idea so as to reconstitute it as a political symbol.

We can see this emerging process through a comparison of the first two autobiographies. The 1845 *Narrative* integrates its participant-observer within an Emersonian pattern of self-reliance, so that the African American search for an authenticating voice becomes incorporated within a New England tradition of the conversion narrative. This fits with the way Douglass’s own voice is framed by the *Narrative*’s prefaces, written by Garrison and Wendell Phillips, which emphasize, in Garrison’s words, qualities of “pathos and sublimity.” By setting the “dark night of slavery” against a vision of sailing ships in Chesapeake Bay “robbed in purest white,” Douglass’s text reinscribes a mode of transcendence that aligns it with the intellectual context of antebellum New England. Russ Castronovo has argued that slave narratives in general tend to “ambiguate national narratives,” creating a hybrid and radically unstable form that performatively foregrounds “the discursive configuration of American freedom,” but such “interruptions and gaps” are not so readily apparent in Douglass’s 1845 *Narrative*, which fuses its African American and transcendentalist discourses to create a tautological structure where each side of the equation is valorized by reference to the other. Douglass’s recollections are legitimated by Garrison’s preface, just as Garrison’s preface is substantiated by Douglass’s experiences; and this circular structure is
replicated within the *Narrative* itself, where the text implicitly reproduces religious metaphors even as it seeks thematically to critique them. The voice of Douglass describes his own emancipation, for example, as “a glorious resurrection, from the tomb of slavery, to the heaven of freedom” (*N*, 65), but as Gregory Jay has written, the recirculation of this Christian rhetoric ironically “works to preclude a wider study of slavery’s historical dimensions.”

The point here is not, of course, to deny what Robert Stepto has called the “sheer poetry” of Douglass’s *Narrative* but to suggest how the book’s effort to embody a poetics of subjectivity renders its relationship with the object of analysis inherently ambivalent. Douglass’s work of the 1840s involves a conception of public performance that underlines its links with the popular genres of oratory and melodrama, where again the emphasis is upon embodying pathos rather than alienating it discursively into narrative form. This, of course, served the political ends shared by Garrison and Douglass at the time: on his tour of Britain in the 1840s, Douglass frequently employed his cousin Henny to act out the role of female victim as an ancillary to his antislavery speeches, while also displaying ostentatiously a variety of whips, chains, and other tools of slavery, so as to make manifest the violence of a system that was often described elsewhere in more euphemistic terms. In these British lectures, Douglass drew heavily upon Theodore Weld’s *American Slavery As It Is Now* (1839), which features a scabrous account of life on the plantations; like Weld, Douglass wanted to disturb and provoke his audience, to make them understand how the “intemperance” of slaveholders, as Weld puts it, tended to feed upon the intoxicating nature of “arbitrary power,” which “is to the mind what alcohol is to the body.”

Yet while the tone of Dickens’s work revolves around disenchantment—the demystification of hypocritical American aspirations toward liberty—the peculiar strength of Douglass’s *Narrative* lies in its delineation of a state in which power and obscenity become interwoven with each other and, consequently, mutually reinforcing. Whereas Dickens disavows obscenity, Douglass theatricalizes it, turning it into a form of lurid melodrama that oddly heightens its political
One of the most famous scenes in the *Narrative* is when Douglass represents himself as a child witnessing Captain Anthony stripping and whipping his Aunt Hester. He recalls being “terrified and horror-stricken at the sight,” which he would never “forget... whilst I remember any thing” (*N*, 19, 18). As many critics have observed, Douglass’s text appears to participate voyeuristically in this “bloody transaction,” positioning the reader, like the child who hides in the closet, as an unseen witness to this abject event (*N*, 19). David Van Leer has written of how this seems to turn parts of Douglass’s work into “a subtle form of pornography,” while Deborah McDowell finds his accounts of slave life to be disturbingly complicit with the “record of black women’s abuse” that they describe. What I would suggest, though, is that this episode, set in the very first chapter of the *Narrative*, establishes an image of power as the central criterion and reference point within Douglass’s world. Power becomes the one thing he can never forget, the commodity that will be negotiated, recirculated, and exchanged in all of his later works.

The 1845 *Narrative*, then, wavers in tone between the illusions of transparency and sincerity, on which so much of the nineteenth-century sentimental tradition depended, and a much more melodramatic subtext. This divided tone is commensurate with the way the text balances highbrow abolitionist sentiment against the kinds of salacious scenarios more typical of Victorian popular culture. Analyzing the reception of American antislavery orators in mid-nineteenth-century Britain, Audrey Fisch concludes that the “titillation” experienced by the audiences as they listened to accounts of “taboo subjects such as sexual abuse” would have been safely circumscribed by assumptions of English national and moral superiority, against which American society appeared as “an exotic and degraded Other.” In a classic double bind, therefore, the idiosyncratic force of Douglass’s performance derived from the way his political agenda was interwoven with the compulsive nature of his story. Sensationalism and didacticism were, for Douglass, mutually reinforcing, not mutually exclusive. In *The Plague of Fantasies*, an exploration of the liminal relationships between fantasy and politics, Slavoj Žižek analyzes how ideologies contain contradictions they cannot afford overtly to acknowledge: “[I]deology is the ‘self-evident’ surface structure whose function is to conceal the underlying ‘unbalanced,’ ‘uncanny’ structure.” For Žižek, therefore, ideology comprises not a “harmonious”
sum of constituent parts but a more heterogeneous compound of “partial elements”:

Power thus relies on an obscene supplement . . . As for the status of this obscene supplement, one should avoid both traps and neither glorify it as subversive nor dismiss it as a false transgression which stabilizes the power edifice (like the ritualized carnivals which temporarily suspend power relations), but insist on its undecidable character. Obscene unwritten rules sustain Power as long as they remain in the shadows; the moment they are publicly recognized, the edifice of Power is thrown into disarray.27

In an ingenious reversal of dialectical logic, Žižek displaces ideological consistency into a cathexis of fetishism, where the part exceeds, and provides access to, the wider circumference of the whole.

The significance of Žižek’s theory for a reading of Douglass’s Narrative is that it enables us to understand the cumulative ideological effects of the text’s radical inconsistency of tone, and of its continual shifts in position and perspective. Rather than approaching any sense of aesthetic equilibrium or philosophical resolution, the Narrative draws its resonance from a mix of multifarious elements chronicling the erratic nature of power struggles within society. The ideological force of Douglass’s first autobiography, in other words, derives from the way it brilliantly brings together different conceptual categories—transcendentalism and African American politics, sensationalism and didacticism, power and obscenity—and binds them tautologically into its performative circuit.

Transnationalism and Exchange

In the 1855 autobiography, My Bondage and My Freedom, Douglass retrospectively discusses his alliance with Garrison’s party during the 1840s and talks of his eventual resentment at being treated by the members of the party as a “thing,” a “piece of Southern property,” whose proper role was to retell the “facts” about plantation life while leaving the “philosophy” of abolition to others.28 This 1855 work is distinguished from its predecessor by a more reflective style that balances representations of power with greater consideration of where that power comes from and whom it serves. Symptomatic of this difference are Douglass’s representations of his birth: whereas the 1845
Narrative begins by stating baldly, “I was born in Tuckahoe” (N, 15), the 1855 text spends four paragraphs describing the “dull, flat, and unthrifty” characteristics of Talbot county before inserting its protagonist into the scene (BF, 140). The active voice of the earlier text has been partially displaced into a world where the subject finds himself shaped by external circumstances.

My Bondage and My Freedom is introduced by James M'Cune Smith, a black physician educated in Scotland, whose opening essay bears the same relation to this second autobiography as do the prefatory pieces to the 1845 Narrative by Garrison and Phillips. Smith hails My Bondage as “an American book, for Americans, in the fullest sense of the idea,” and he describes Douglass himself as “a Representative American Man—a type of his countrymen” (BF, 137, 132). Yet Smith also mentions how it was Douglass’s “sojourn in England” between 1845 and 1847 that “awakened him to the consciousness of new powers that lay in him,” and he emphasizes how the particular characteristic of this new work is its skill in “observing, comparing, and careful classifying” (BF, 130, 134). Comparison, indeed, is one of Smith’s central concerns: he describes Douglass as moving from a “knowledge of the world...bounded by the visible horizon on Col. Lloyd’s plantation” to a faculty that “enabled him to see, and weigh, and compare whatever passed before him”; and Smith himself plays upon this theme by comparing the oratorical powers of Douglass to those of “the younger Pitt” when he entered the British House of Commons (BF, 126, 128). In a footnote to his introduction, Smith also acknowledges the general contribution to Douglass’s work of Julia Griffiths, who probably helped with the editing of this text and who might well have been instrumental in steering the author toward a style of popular nationalism suitable for the literary marketplace of the 1850s.29

The point to be emphasized, though, is that this style of popular nationalism, as it emerges in My Bondage and My Freedom, is dependent upon a transnational, comparative consciousness. Sundquist has remarked upon how the terms bondage and freedom relate paradoxically rather than dialectically to each other in this work, and the same is true of nationalism and transnationalism: only by moving outside the charmed circle of the nation can Douglass put himself in a position to redescribe its circumference.30 Consequently, the rhetorical structure of My Bondage differs markedly from Douglass’s earlier autobiography in its heightened self-consciousness about how its formulations are
contingent upon a particular angle of vision. Early in the narrative, for example, Douglass deliberately foregrounds the process of authorial interpretation by relating how “[s]everal old logs and stumps imposed upon me, and got themselves taken for wild beasts.” Extending this childhood personification into a lesson about allegory, he concludes: “Thus early I learned that the point of view from which a thing is viewed is of some importance” (BF, 148). This focus upon the point of view runs throughout the text, with the narrator taking pleasure in disturbing preconceptions about what bondage or freedom might signify. Colonel Lloyd’s plantation, for instance, is said to be endowed with an “almost Eden-like beauty,” and Douglass talks of how he enjoyed its picturesque scenery without being aware of its more sinister implications (BF, 162). Thus the illusion that holds these networks of slavery in place, as Douglass describes it, is a fiction of absolutism that would translate history into myth and suppress any sense of geographical relativism: “Every slaveholder seeks to impress his slave with a belief in the boundlessness of slave territory, and of his own almost illimitable power” (BF, 310). John Carlos Rowe has written that Douglass’s narratives show the system of slavery trying to repress the arbitrary nature of its construction in an attempt to naturalize the status of its own authority, and through this pattern of perspectival reversal, Douglass illuminates ways in which the domain of freedom expands and contracts according to the consciousness of the observer. Hence the Lloyd plantation, “a little nation of its own,” was “just a place to my boyish taste” (BF, 160, 166): being unaware of anything different, the youthful Douglass acquiesces in the slaveholder’s fantasy of omnipotence. In The Black Atlantic, Paul Gilroy points to this “little nation” metaphor as an indication of how the slave plantation was no less an “archaic institution” than the modern state, but the more subtle suggestion put forward by Douglass is that nationalism, like freedom, remains a relative construction defined through a series of conjunctions and disjunctions in the mind of the observer.

Hence Douglass does not simply represent his childish self as misconstruing the nature of freedom; he also, more radically, manipulates this persona so as to interrogate the nature of freedom and its inherent contradictions. My Bondage and My Freedom consequently adumbrates a peculiarly mixed-up world, where the two central terms become mutually constitutive. While the author talks of how the “order of civilization is reversed” on the plantation (BF, 151), he also registers
this confusion of categories extending to other aspects of society. If
the 1845 Narrative defines its world in terms of Manichaean polarities
of light and darkness, the 1855 autobiography redescribes it through
a paradoxical play of contraries, where one category slides discomfit-
ingly into its antinomy: “There is a healing in the angel wing of sleep,
even for the slave-boy” (BF, 150). Conceptually, this makes My Bond-
age more abstract and impersonal than the earlier work: by empha-
sizing how “Everybody, in the south, wants the privilege of whipping
somebody else,” Douglass shifts the focus of his invective away from
particular slaveholders toward the plantation system itself (BF, 165).
The more melodramatic violence of the earlier Narrative is also tem-
pered in this 1855 work by an acknowledgment of how African Ameri-
cans, too, are not averse to wielding the whip: Uncle Isaac Copper,
who teaches the young Douglass the Lord’s Prayer, “shared the com-
mon passion of his country, and, therefore, seldom found any means of
keeping his disciples in order short of flogging” (BF, 165). By a simi-
lar kind of reversal, Douglass’s “old master,” Captain Anthony, is de-
scribed as “not by nature worse than other men” but as someone who,
like his chattel, “is the victim of the slave system” (BF, 171). Later
the narrator plays verbally on the idea of subject, suggesting that the
active subject also finds himself unknowingly vulnerable to external
forces: “The slave is a subject, subjected by others; the slaveholder is
a subject, but he is the author of his own subjection” (BF, 189). The
elaborate pun here is reminiscent of other literary texts of the 1850s
that deploy similar wordplay in order to illuminate the complex inter-
sections of bondage and freedom. Ishmael’s complaint in Moby-Dick
(1851)—“Who aint a slave? Tell me that”—is reflected in Douglass’s
prognosis of slavery as a chain reaction, wherein he finds himself re-
lying to the oxen as Covey, the overseer, relates to him: “Covey was
was to break me, I was to break them; break and be broken—such is life”
(BF, 263).33

This is not, of course, to imply that My Bondage and My Freedom
equates oxen and black workers, or that it relapses into the fatalism of
Melville’s more somber work. It is, though, to suggest how Douglass’s
text complicates its progressivist agenda by chronicling a world organ-
ized around an ideology of exchange. This places My Bondage in an
oblique relation to other African American narratives written during
this decade. Carla Peterson has discussed “African-American writers’
gradual shift from slave autobiography to novel” during the 1850s and
has noted how writers like William Wells Brown switched from the mode of first-person to third-person narration in order to problematize “essentialized notions of black selfhood.” What is not so clear, though, is how such fictional refractions of the black self effectively impinge upon the nature of the racial dialectic itself: in Clotel (1853), for instance, Brown’s narrator envisions freedom and slavery as forms of “good” and “evil,” “parallel lines” that will seemingly never “come to an end.” For Brown, freedom and slavery remain mutually exclusive categories that define each other through their perpetual opposition. For Douglass, however, these oppositions threaten to turn into paradoxical equivalences, since nothing appears to make sense except in terms of its contrary: it is, he points out, the very idea of “Liberty” that came to “torment” him with a sense of his “wretched condition” (BF, 227). The dilemma of My Bondage and My Freedom is that no category is allowed to remain syntactically unqualified: Douglass talks of ascending not to the “heaven of freedom,” as in his earlier Narrative, but “to the heaven of comparative freedom” (BF, 286). Indeed, there seems to be a conscious intertextual relation here with the first autobiography, as though Douglass in 1855 were seeking deliberately to qualify, if not altogether demystify, the celebrated legend of heroic self-emancipation that had become associated with that earlier representation of his life story, a story that had of course served as a model for much African American writing in the 1840s and 1850s. Typical in My Bondage is Douglass’s use of the cagey parenthesis, as when he observes: “We were plotting against our (so called) lawful rulers” (BF, 309). Everything here is presented as provisional, as susceptible to reversal, and he records with a certain sardonic humor how his mistress, Mrs. Auld, would have acted just like him “in a reverse of circumstances” (BF, 228). In the same vein, he takes a grim pleasure in showing how things can work out contrariwise: he tells of how, after his work in the Baltimore shipyards, Master Hugh would “dole out to me a sixpence or a shilling, with a view, perhaps, of kindling up my gratitude”; but then he goes on to note that “this practice had the opposite effect,” since “it was an admission of my right to the whole sum” (BF, 341).

The darkly comic undercurrent that runs through My Bondage and My Freedom, then, emerges from intellectual quarrels with a utopian-dystopian topos common to New England abolitionism and various forms of African American narrative. In the last chapter, Douglass dis-
patches his former abolitionist colleagues with a paradoxical flourish, as he declares axiomatically that “a man may ‘stand up so straight as to lean backward’” (BF, 393). Similarly, Douglass distances himself from the emphasis on racial purity that inspired the emigrationist attitudes of his political rival, Martin Delany; indeed, as Robert Levine has noted, Douglass remains remarkably quiet in his autobiographical narratives about interactions with his black contemporaries.36 It is an illuminating silence, though, indicative of his markedly divergent points of view. Rather than Delany’s vision of alternative worlds, the entire structure of Douglass’s second autobiography is predicated on a kind of paradoxical loop, where the narrator moves through successive situations—Colonel Lloyd’s plantation, the Auld household in Maryland, the association with Garrison—not in order to leave them behind but to acquire a better perspective on them. Douglass’s narrative, in other words, moves forward only for the purposes of looking back. This movement leads to an ironic symbiosis between his conditions of bondage and freedom, an irony he himself points out toward the end of this book when he remarks: “There is nothing very striking or peculiar about my career as a freeman, when viewed apart from my life as a slave” (BF, 349). In this way, we are led to see the peculiar interest of My Bondage and My Freedom arising not from any simple rhetoric of emancipation but from its account of interactions and exchanges between very different kinds of society. The text positions itself on a dividing line between North and South, present and past, black and white, and it achieves its style of unexpected congruence and comparison from a capacity to look both ways.

For Douglass, then, the politics of abolition in the 1850s involved gaining both literal and metaphorical distance from scenarios of slavery so that he could refocus them in a different kind of light. Slavery, in his eyes, became associated with isolation and parochialism, with the perspective of the slaveholder who misrepresented his fiefdom as the world. If the plantation presented itself as “a little nation of its own,” emancipation would necessarily involve a process of metaphorical transnationalism, or “exposure” as Douglass puts it in 1853, whereby the atavism of slave conditions would be shown up by their being placed in juxtaposition to other territories and different customs.37 This is one of the reasons Douglass was particularly keen on a transatlantic imaginary. Throughout the 1850s, he frequently remarks on the “rapidity, safety and certainty” of the Atlantic passage, going
so far in 1859 as to suggest that the improved transport system is “almost converting the two continents into one.”38 For Douglass, this advanced capability for travel crucially betokens a psychological and political mobility, through which existing practices might be placed in parallel with those of other cultures. The clearest exposition of this philosophy comes in his famous speech at Rochester in 1852, “The Meaning of July Fourth for the Negro”:

No nation can now shut itself up from the surrounding world and trot round in the same old path of its fathers without interference. The time was when such could be done. Long established customs of hurtful character could formerly fence themselves in, and do their evil work with social impunity. Knowledge was then confined and enjoyed by the privileged few, and the multitude walked on in mental darkness. But a change has now come over the affairs of mankind. Walled cities and empires have become unfashionable. The arm of commerce has borne away the gates of the strong city. Intelligence is penetrating the darkest corners of the globe. It makes its pathway over and under the sea, as well as on the earth. Oceans no longer divide, but link nations together. From Boston to London is now a holiday excursion. Space is comparatively annihilated.—Thoughts expressed on one side of the Atlantic are distinctly heard on the other.39

From this point of view, cosmopolitan consciousness becomes in itself a political necessity. Douglass is not just interested in establishing links with like-minded people on the other side of the Atlantic; he is also concerned with how the very form of this transatlantic communication serves to ironize and displace indigenous assumptions. The prophetic, slightly breathless, tone here might seem almost McLuhanite in its anticipation of a global village binding together both sides of the Atlantic. But, in fact, *My Bondage and My Freedom* is not so much concerned with the annihilation of space as with its traversal, and so it is appropriate that toward the end of the narrative his trajectory leads him to discuss his “two years of semi-exile in Great Britain and Ireland” (*BF*, 389). Indeed, the whole of this narrative is, in some sense, about exile: from the “Eden-like beauty” of Colonel Lloyd’s plantation (*BF*, 162), from a world of innocence into the harsh experience of slavery, from the South to the North. If Douglass’s first autobiography turns upon a quest for self-realization, his second represents
alienation as the condition of all knowledge. *My Bondage and My Freedom* clearly presents Douglass as an American patriot but, equally significant, as one of the “cosmopolitan patriots,” in Kwame Anthony Appiah’s phrase, whose understanding of national fictions involves a recognition of contingency and of the need to negotiate rather than obliterate material difference.40

**Transatlantic Mirrors**

These strategies of reversal were not, however, confined exclusively to textual practices. In fact, it was Douglass’s uncanny ability to manipulate perspectives in order to demystify power relations that makes his work particularly interesting within a transnational context. Ireland was the first country of the British Isles that Douglass visited, from September 1845 through January 1846, and his observations not only provide insights into the relationship between Ireland and England but also, by extension, suggest how American racial struggle came to appear as a dark reflection of other ethnic conflicts at this time. In terms of a transatlantic imaginary, the build-up to the U.S. Civil War carries reverberations heard in British literature and culture during the 1840s and 1850s.

In his 1845 *Narrative*, Douglass mentions “Sheridan’s mighty speeches on and in behalf of Catholic emancipation,” thus implicitly linking the circumstances of Irish Catholics under British rule with the plight of slaves in the American South (*N*, 42). This is a parallel reinforced by Garrison’s preface, which sings the praises of Daniel O’Connell, “distinguished advocate of universal emancipation, and the mightiest champion of prostrate but not conquered Ireland” (*N*, 6). Douglass himself heard O’Connell speak in Dublin on 29 September 1845, and he subsequently wrote to Garrison that of all the speakers he had heard over the last four years, “I have never heard one, by whom I was more completely captivated than by Mr. O’Connell.”41 A few months later, commenting on the miserable social conditions in Ireland, Douglass remarked that the poor Irish lived “in much the same degradation as the American slaves,” adding: “I see much here to remind me of my former condition.”42 Again, in his farewell speech to the British people, delivered in London on 30 March 1847, Douglass reinforced this parallel between the Irish and African Americans by citing O’Connell directly:
O’Connell once said, speaking of Ireland—no matter for my illustration, how truly or falsely—that “her history may be traced, like the track of a wounded man through a crowd.” If this description can be given of Ireland, how much more true is it when applied to the sons and daughters of Africa, in the United States?  

Douglass was by no means the only commentator at this time to draw an analogy between slavery, which was dividing the United States, and the Irish question, which was causing political strife within Britain. Dickens, in American Notes, remarks how Southern slave culture reminds him of the “ignorant peasantry of Ireland,” while Thomas Carlyle, in a series of essays over many years, consistently equates the “degraded” Irish with that “sooty African” element that he saw as a threat to what he called “the Transatlantic Saxon Nation.” Much of Carlyle’s vitriol stemmed from his antipathy toward the emancipation of slaves in the Caribbean. In “Occasional Discourse on the Nigger Question” (1849), he compared the West Indies to “a Black Ireland,” prophesying that economic poverty and a psychology of “servitude” would not be abolished so easily as its legal equivalent. In “Shooting Niagara: And After?” (1867), he develops his ontology of “servantship and mastership” still further, describing “Swarmer” as a regrettable outcome of the U.S. Civil War, where principles of order and authority had fallen by the wayside so that “three million absurd Blacks, men and brothers (of a sort) are completely ‘emancipated.’”

One of the things that most concerns Carlyle is the indirect effect of the U.S. Civil War on English society. In particular, he fears that the triumph of liberalism in the United States will help promote the cause of electoral reform in Britain, thus dealing another blow to the “Aristocracy,” whom he sees as the country’s natural governors. In this sense, many of the divisions within British society—between England and Ireland, conservatism and reform, the North and the South—are mirrored in the literal outbreak of violence across the Atlantic in 1861. The U.S. Civil War, in other words, can be seen as a virtual reflection of those implicit tensions and half-suppressed conflicts that had been accumulating within British culture throughout the middle part of the nineteenth century. Carlyle’s own “Signs of the Times” (1829), with its disdain for industrialization and its nostalgia for a unity “in the whole fabric of society,” was one expression of the kind of organic idiom that sought to repress divisions in the name of national identity.
Benjamin Disraeli’s *Sybil; or, the Two Nations* (1845) similarly frets about “the condition of the main body” of the state and harks back to a monarchical medievalism in its efforts to overcome contemporary conflicts. (Divisive abolitionists who address antislavery meetings at Exeter Hall in London are specifically satirized in Disraeli’s novel.) 49 Even more illuminating in this regard is Elizabeth Gaskell’s *North and South* (1855), which again contemplates the “condition of England” through its cultural clash between the Southern landscape of Helstone, “like a village . . . in one of Tennyson’s poems,” and the harsher values of Milton, in the northern county of Darkshire. Here the captain of industry, John Thornton, finds his business threatened by the development of international trade markets: “[T]he Americans,” he complains, “are getting their yarns so into the general market, that our only chance is producing them at a lower rate.” Accordingly, he brings in “hands” from Ireland in an effort to keep wages low, thus provoking contempt for “them Irishers” from the Milton workers; but this move turns out ultimately to be counterproductive, since the “utter want of skill on the part of the Irish hands whom he had imported” becomes a “daily annoyance” to Thornton himself.50

One of the points to emphasize here is that around the middle of the century this “condition of England” question that so much troubled Victorian Britain came to be reconceived in transnational terms.51 In *North and South*, Gaskell’s vision of English unity, the annealing of conflict between North and South, involves suppressing the move by Irish laborers to deny English workers their fair wages, as well as suppressing the tendency of U.S. markets to undermine English industrial communities. John Thornton is represented as getting his come-uppance in this regard, since he is eventually ruined by his agent’s trust in a U.S. company that “went down, along with several others, just at this time, like a pack of cards.”52 In this new world of transnational communication, capital, like labor, has become subject to the fluctuations of international markets, but Gaskell, prizing a more traditional social stability and cohesion, extrapolates her organic version of England from the (partial) repression of transatlantic turbulence, thus exemplifying how the attempt to demarcate British culture at this time was uncomfortably shadowed and threatened by the specter of the United States. Indeed, divisions between the north and south of England, as represented in Gaskell’s novel, disconcertingly mirrored those between the northern and southern states in the U.S.:
on both sides of the Atlantic, the industrial North found itself pitted against the more traditional South. If the clashes in Britain were less overt and violent, they nevertheless formed parallels that sometimes became inescapable. Gaskell, a friend of Charles Eliot Norton and a staunch supporter of the North during the U.S. Civil War, saw clearly how the cotton famine in Manchester during the early 1860s was tied inexorably to events in the United States, and the many large meetings held in Manchester and Liverpool to discuss the American conflict would have served not only to engage British workers with the progress of the Civil War but also to remind them of their own long-standing quarrels with English conservatism. These were parallels that liberal members of parliament like Richard Cobden and John Bright were keen to reinforce, as they linked support for the Northern states with pressure for further electoral reform in Britain.53 Conversely, of course, conservative organs like the London Times disparaged these reform movements on both sides of the Atlantic equally.

Questions of U.S. slavery sometimes evoke the shades of national exceptionalism on the grounds that the condition of Southern slaves is not a topic susceptible to consideration in analogous or parallel terms. Douglass himself always disliked metaphorical translations of slavery—in figures like “wage slavery,” and so on—claiming that such circumlocutions tended to debase the uniquely horrifying nature of the actual plantation experience. The issue here, however, is not so much the metaphorical attenuation of slavery but rather its place within a transnational continuum, where the power dynamics underpinning the U.S. situation can be seen to manifest themselves in different forms elsewhere. Just as English writers like Disraeli and Gaskell refracted American conflicts in their work, so from Douglass’s point of view, the mutual hostility between the English and the Irish was a political mirror of internal racial conflicts within the United States. This is why he identifies with the Irish when he is in Britain: from this perspective, they appear as honorary African Americans, engaged in a power struggle with the white oppressor. At a meeting in Dublin in 1845 to campaign for the repeal of the Corn Laws, Douglass is introduced by Daniel O’Connell as “the black O’Connell of the United States.”54 In London a year later, Douglass reaffirms his support for the Anti-Corn Law movement and declares that after its “complete triumph . . . the next great reform will be that of complete suffrage.”55
Nearly thirty years later, in 1872, he is still describing himself as “something of an Irishman as well as a negro,” thereby implicitly aligning himself with George Odger, Secretary of the London Trades’ Council, who a few years earlier had specifically compared discrimination against African Americans in the United States with discrimination against the Irish in England. Racial stereotyping was quite common on both sides of the Atlantic at this time, and as if to emphasize Odger’s point, an 1862 article in the supposedly humorous London magazine, *Punch*, suggests that “the Irish Yahoo” might be “the missing link . . . between the Gorilla and the Negro.”

Thus, we can see how Douglass’s conception of freedom interacting symbiotically with a form of bondage, as outlined in his 1855 autobiography, is reproduced in his analysis of the various power exchanges in mid-nineteenth-century Britain and the United States. For Douglass, freedom remained a category that could only be explicated in comparative terms: liberty for one party tended to mean less liberty for another. This is one of the reasons his view of emancipation is always tinged with pessimism. Unlike Whitman, say, who welcomes the idea of freedom with an exuberant largesse, freedom for Douglass is much more a competitive phenomenon, involving a grim fight for survival. In fact, it would be truer to say that power, rather than freedom, is Douglass’s main theme, since his work is at its most effective when determining ways in which this power nexus works its way through society. What Douglass perceives from his immediate political encounters, contemporary historians such as Theodore Allen have considered more analytically, for Allen describes racial slavery in the nineteenth-century United States as “a system of social control” dominated and maintained by class interests, and forming a “mirror” of the hegemony exercised by the British ruling class of this time over Ireland. In a speech in Baltimore in 1865, Douglass himself sardonically compared the power relations between the English and the Irish in Britain to those between white and black Americans in the United States:

Wealth, learning and ability made an Irishman an Englishman. The same metamorphosing power converts a Negro into a white man in this country. When prejudice cannot deny the black man’s ability, it denies his race, and claims him as a white man. It affirms that if he is not exactly white, he ought to be.
Six years later, in 1871, Douglass similarly noted with approval that various members of the “English royal family” were roundly hissed on a visit to Ireland. He called the incident “a very natural and genuine exhibition of the feelings of the Irish people,” bearing in mind the “tyrannical and oppressive” nature of their governance.60

More or less concurrently, however, Douglass also sought to marginalize the Irish in the United States itself as “foreigners” whose values remained antipathetic to those of American democracy.61 To some extent, this hostility emerged from what the African American community in general took to be the reactionary, proslavery tendencies of Irish-American culture. Speaking in New York City in 1853, Douglass epitomized the tensions that existed between these two ethnic groups:

The Irish people, warm-hearted, generous, and sympathizing with the oppressed everywhere when they stand on their own green island, are instantly taught on arriving in this Christian country to hate and despise the colored people. They are taught to believe that we eat the bread which of right belongs to them. The cruel lie is told the Irish that our adversity is essential to their prosperity.62

However, it was not just the Irish who saw things differently when they reached the United States but also Douglass himself. Time and again, we see the angle of incidence and reflection in his work varying, according to the particular position in which he finds himself within a competitive interethnic situation. Notwithstanding his sympathy for the downtrodden Irish in Great Britain, he complains bitterly in 1855 when Thomas F. Meagher, an Irish immigrant, is admitted to practice as an attorney in New York, when African Americans are still denied access to the legal profession. Douglass’s invective against the Irish here reaches vituperative proportions. Addressing white America, he complains of how “native born colored Americans” are treated worse in their homeland than Irish “aliens . . . the foreigners swarming in your midst, those who fill your jails, and alm-houses as well as build them.”63 Douglass’s description of “swarming” foreigners is a curious anticipation of Carlyle’s complaint a few years later about the “Swarmery” brought about by emancipated American slaves, and it suggests the ways in which, not unlike Carlyle, Douglass remained philosophically skeptical about the ontology of freedom and about ways in which the virtues of self-reliance could ever be dissociated.
from a larger confluence of power relations. Stefan Collini has argued that it was “Carlyle above all who put into circulation a particular conception of manliness as part of a larger vision of the place of bracing conflict and stoically borne suffering in a power-governed universe.” and despite the manifold differences in their political perspectives, it seems likely that Douglass, who prided himself on being “a man among men,” looked at the world in a similar way.

As Richard Hardack has argued, there are various reasons why Douglass’s attitude to the Irish-American community should have remained antagonistic. The economic rivalry between two disadvantaged groups is one obvious explanation; Douglass’s tendency to demonize the Catholic Church as a “force of evil” is another. Coming from a Methodist background, Douglass shared many of the traditional nineteenth-century American prejudices that attributed intemperance and squalor to the Irish, and he manifested equally conventional reactions, while on his trip to Europe in 1887, against what he calls “the hollowness of the vast structure of the Romish church.” In this sense, Hardack is right to say that when Douglass warns against the establishment of a “black Ireland in America,” made up of an “aggrieved class,” he is betraying a covertly “nativist” streak, since the idea of Irish poverty appears in his eyes as a potential threat to that patriotic ideal in which he wants African Americans to participate fully. One particular aspect of the Douglass persona brought to light by this nationalist agenda is his political support for the Republican party, with which he affiliated himself in 1856. Priscilla Wald has remarked upon the parallels between Douglass and Abraham Lincoln, who both recognized and effectively manipulated the U.S. Constitution as a political symbol during the 1850s, but it is important also to recognize how Douglass’s sympathy for Republican values carried on long after Lincoln’s death. It was, for instance, quite in keeping with this Republican inclination that Douglass’s most popular lecture during the Reconstruction era, “Self-Made Men,” was a paean to rugged individualism. Indeed, one reason that his third autobiography, *Life and Times* (1882, revised 1893), has not received much attention from critics is that its homage to a cult of success and its clear dissociation of civil equality from social equality do not sit comfortably with the more popular image of Douglass as a champion of liberal reform.

The revised *Life and Times* in fact reprints part of this 1883 speech by Douglass on the “black Ireland” threat. Taken within this context,
it is easier to understand the continuities between his paradoxical representation of emancipation in *My Bondage and My Freedom* and his view in the later work of how racial prejudice and oppression work like chain reactions. It is, therefore, possible retrospectively to reread his second autobiography in the light of his third, and so to see how the pessimism explicit by 1893 is already implicit in the paradoxical equations of 1855:

Perhaps no class of our fellow-citizens has carried this prejudice against color to a point more extreme and dangerous than have our Catholic Irish fellow-citizens, and yet no people on the face of the earth have been more relentlessly persecuted and oppressed on account of race and religion than have this same Irish people.

But in Ireland persecution has at last reached a point where it reacts terribly upon her persecutors. England is to-day reaping the bitter consequences of her injustice and oppression. (*LT*, 973)

This perception of how a social dynamic “reacts terribly” suggests a double-edged quality that goes against Hardack’s more straightforward proposition of an unequivocal “anti-Catholic, anti-Irish American discourse” in Douglass’s work. While Douglass to some extent shared a common African American antipathy toward the Irish, he also acknowledged that they too had been caught up in the chain of oppression and reaction. The tone here is fatalistic as much as aggrieved. Charles Darwin is mentioned briefly in *Life and Times* (*LT*, 939), and what we find in Douglass’s later work is a more typically naturalist conception of force, rather than morality, as the ultimate arbiter of social ends (*LT*, 973). Recording his impressions of Europe on the 1887 visit, Douglass talks of an “irrepressible conflict between European civilization and barbarism,” and it is such a recognition of primordial struggle, epitomized by scenes of “heroic endeavor” and “desperate courage,” that inflects all of his later writings (*LT*, 989).

This drift toward a naturalist framework is another reason for the relative unpopularity of *Life and Times* as an example of African American literature. Whereas Douglass’s first autobiography, in particular, projects the natural world as an extension of the narrator’s mind, a territory heroically to be conquered, his third autobiography moves sharply away from such anthropocentric conceptualizations of the environment. Gillian Beer has written of how “Darwin found the constant placing of man at the centre of explanation probably the most ex-
asperating characteristic of providential and natural theological writing’; but Douglass’s autobiographies shift intellectually from one mode to the other, for if the 1845 Narrative is set ultimately in a providential light, casting Douglass himself as a heroic representative man, the 1893 Life and Times is shadowed by a more discomfiting sense of alienation. As Sundquist has observed, writers of the 1890s tend to reframe ‘the pervasive influence of social Darwinism on the structure and values of the American community’ during this era, and Douglass’s last book also carries this burden. We see these pressures at work in chapter 16 of Life and Times, when Douglass recalls a visit he paid to his former master, Thomas Auld, a few years earlier:

Our courses had been determined for us, not by us. We had both been flung, by powers that did not ask our consent, upon a mighty current of life, which we could neither resist nor control. By this current he was a master, and I a slave. (LT, 876)

In line with his familiar narrative strategy of refiguring and recontextualizing the past, Douglass sets Auld’s situation in another perspective as he notes how their lives were now “verging toward a point where differences disappear” (LT, 876). The emphasis here on determinism and on life’s “mighty current” would seem to betoken an impersonality markedly at odds with his earlier narrative performances, which were directed more toward the generation of empathy with his audience.

Nevertheless, Douglass’s work is characteristically at its most incisive and compelling when dealing specifically with power struggles, that concatenation of energies that brings together, in a fatal double bind, the oppressor and the oppressed. Although the nature of these forces varies—more personalized and explosive in the early work, more abstract and systematic in the later—this focus on power as the prime source of identification and antagonism remains relatively constant. This is why Douglass’s accounts of his stand-up fight with the overseer, Covey, and the whippings meted out to his Aunt Hester are the most intense focal points of his first two autobiographies: in the 1845 Narrative, especially, these events carry a cathetic charge, associated with the literalization of a violence that would otherwise remain vaguely metaphorical. Rather than seeing power as something to be transcended, these narratives visualize it as something to be exchanged; indeed, the crucial points in these texts are those at which
the power balance is renegotiated, so that Douglass comes to appear as master of his own destiny rather than as its slave.

The way in which Douglass manipulates authorial perspectives so as not to confine himself to any single point of identification is in keeping with the way he avoids conflating cultural positions with essentialist identities. Although Douglass may have shared Carlyle’s conception of nature as a hazardous and violent terrain, he certainly did not share the Scotsman’s view of social aristocrats as “natural” rulers. On the contrary, Douglass’s work incorporates a sense of fluidity that makes it amenable to psychological and social mobility. Couching this mobility in negative terms, Peter Walker has suggested that Douglass’s sense of selfhood was shaped as much by the absent white father as by the black mother, and that he was consequently tormented by a “hopeless secret desire to be white”; similarly, George Fredrickson has observed how “romantic racialists,” such as Garrison—and, indeed, Emerson—tended to attribute natural characteristics to particular races and thus to see the mulatto as a “degenerate type.” For Douglass, though, the recognition of such hybridity facilitated his capacity to switch positions, to align himself sometimes with the black community and sometimes with the white establishment. In his later works particularly, Douglass appropriates the conception of himself as a “divided man,” in Walker’s phrase, to project an equally refractory view of society as a site of conflict and contradiction. Disdaining notions of black unity or ethnic solidarity, Douglass interpreted racial affiliation as a much more plastic quality, liable to metamorphosis and always modulated by the inflections of power. This is why his attitude toward the Irish keeps shifting: in England, he empathizes with the “black” Irish as a downtrodden race, but in the United States, he finds that Irish immigrants have become part of the oppressive “white” regime. It is not just the position of the Irish but also Douglass’s that changes. Schooled in an aesthetic of paradox and reversal, he is concerned always with the fractious and divisive nature of hegemony and resistance, how one party strives to exercise control over another.

The key point here is how Douglass always insists on seeing cultures in terms of their mutual relations. Writing of the Irish situation in the nineteenth century, Terry Eagleton has observed that it is through “tropes” such as paradox, metonymy, and oxymoron “that the relationship between imperial Britain and colonial Ireland has to be
read," since each country could "glimpse something of its own future in the glass of the other." A similar kind of dynamic applies, in Douglass’s eyes, to the interaction between white and black America. Just as Ireland represents what Eagleton calls "a rebarbative world which threatened to unmask Britain’s own civility," so the power structures of white America are shadowed, in Douglass’s texts, by a series of parallel black discourses that do not so much directly oppose institutionalized assumptions as empty them out, flaunting their moral hollowness and naked self-interest. By focusing on a nexus of power exchange, and by illuminating ways in which established formulations are susceptible to reversal, Douglass elucidates a world in which entrenched systems of authority can be rhetorically displaced and defamiliarized.

Douglass’s argument with Garrison, then, involved not just an intellectual dispute over the meaning of the U.S. Constitution but a fundamental disagreement about the nature and purpose of power. In 1832, Garrison talks of how emancipation would mean the freedom of slaves “to seek intellectual and moral mastery over their white competitors,” but when this passage subsequently appears on the masthead of the Liberator, the words “mastery” and “competitors” are replaced by the more emollient terms, “equality” and “brethren.” The change in emphasis here is revealing. Whereas Garrison came to see political power as corrupt by definition, Douglass perceived it as a category to be appropriated for his own purposes. Whereas Garrison looked forward to a utopian day of deliverance, Douglass always thrived on antagonism and provocation. This is one of the reasons the Garrisonians were so perturbed by Douglass’s relationship with Julia Griffiths: by flaunting his close friendship with a white woman, by famously parading down Broadway in 1849 with Griffiths on one arm and her sister, Eliza Griffiths, on the other, Douglass appeared to be spurning noble ideas of Christian brotherhood in favor of a merciless desire to beat white society at its own game. What Douglass’s works project above all is a view of society as a cycle of conflict, riven by power struggles between different racial and ethnic groups, all of whom seem inexorably bound to the Ixion wheel of domination and subordination. The reverse projections of transnationalism open up these perspectives in Douglass’s texts, while also reflecting back across the Atlantic, since one disconcerting aspect in his depiction of internecine violence is the way it threatens to lift the lid on parallel divisions elsewhere. Douglass’s narratives render with brutal literalism the corporate and corpo-
real strife that, in the case of English writers like Gaskell, is kept discreetly under wraps or sublimated metaphorically into harmonious, if unlikely, reconciliations. By addressing the explicit violence between competing groups in American society, Douglass comments also on the implicit violence between competing groups in Britain. In this way, the intransigent, compulsive nature of his work can be located ultimately in its ruthless demystification of conventional metaphors so as to locate an atavistic force that underlies social convention and literary gentility, as well as in its incisive capacity to represent how such power functions within a broad cultural framework of conflict and exchange.

Cambridge University

Notes

I am grateful to the American Graduate Seminar at Cambridge University for comments on an earlier version of this essay.


3 See Frances Smith Foster, Witnessing Slavery: The Development of Antebellum Slave Narratives (Westport, Conn.: Greenwood, 1979), 15; Gerald Fulkerson, “Exile as Emergence: Frederick Douglass in Great Britain, 1845–1847,” Quarterly Journal of Speech 60 (February 1974): 73. For the view that the 1830s and early 1840s were the highpoint of transatlantic abolitionism, which had passed its peak by the time Douglass arrived in Britain in 1845, see David Turley, The Culture of English Antislavery, 1780–1860 (London: Routledge, 1991), 197.


in the West Indies dates to the late 1820s, when he was editor of The Genius of Universal Emancipation. On the quarrel over women’s role in the antislavery movement, see Howard Temperley, British Antislavery, 1833–1870 (London: Longman, 1972), 89–90.


17 Douglass, Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass (1845), in Autobiographies/Frederick Douglass (New York: Library of America, 1994), 8, 58, 59; further references to the 1845 Narrative are to this edition and will be cited parenthetically in the text as N.

18 Russ Castronovo, Fathering the Nation: American Genealogies of Slavery


28 Douglass, *My Bondage and My Freedom* (1855), in *Autobiographies/Frederick Douglass*, 366, 367; further references are to this edition and will be cited parenthetically in the text as BF.

29 See McFeely, *Frederick Douglass*, 182. In a typical gesture, Griffiths induced Douglass in 1852 to write his only work of pure fiction, “The Heroic Slave,” as part of the anthology designed to raise money for the antislavery cause. Based on the life of Madison Washington, “The Heroic Slave” appropriately represents the African American protagonist as beholden to British political liberty on two separate occasions. After his successful flight to Canada in 1840, the narrative persona
of Washington writes: “I nestle in the mane of the British lion, protected by his mighty paw from the talons and beak of the American eagle”; and after the 1841 rebellion on board the Creole, the ship is guided by Washington into the “British port” of Nassau, in the Bahama Islands, where the American slaves are set free (in Ronald Takaki, Violence in the Black Imagination: Essays and Documents, rev. ed. [New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 1993], 56, 73).

30 See Sundquist, To Wake the Nations, 121–22.
36 Levine, Martin Delany, Frederick Douglass, 4–6.
39 Douglass, “The Meaning of July Fourth for the Negro,” speech delivered 5 July 1852, in Life and Writings, ed. Foner, 2:203. (An extract from this speech was published as an appendix to My Bondage and My Freedom, under the title “What to the Slave is the Fourth of July?”)
41 Douglass to Garrison, 29 September 1845, in Life and Writings, ed. Foner, 1:121.
42 Douglass to Garrison, 26 February 1846, in Life and Writings, ed. Foner, 1:141.
43 Douglass, “Farewell Speech to the British People,” in Life and Writings, ed. Foner, 1:212.

Ibid., 5:21.


The “condition of England” question was also aired widely in the United States (see Marcus Cunliffe, *Chattel Slavery and Wage Slavery: The Anglo-American Context, 1830–1860* [Athens: Univ. of Georgia Press, 1979], 14–15).

Gaskell, *North and South*, 515.


McFeely, *Frederick Douglass*, 280; for George Odger’s comparison, see Philip S. Foner, *British Labor and the American Civil War* (New York: Holmes and Meier, 1981), 60.


Douglass, Life and Times of Frederick Douglass, Written by Himself, in Autobiographies/Douglass, 1017. Further references will be to this edition and will be cited parenthetically in the text as LT.


Walker, Moral Choices, 261. For another view of how Douglass’s psychological and political ambivalence was rooted “in his very multatloness—his racial ties to both white and black,” see Takaki, Violence in the Black Imagination, 18.
On the association of nineteenth-century Irish Americans with both black and white cultures, see Noel Ignatiev, *How The Irish Became White* (New York: Routledge, 1995).


Ibid., 9.
