

8-9-2021

## American in Principle: Frederick Douglass' Navigation of American Identity

Daniel Eric Solis

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AMERICAN IN PRINCIPLE: FREDERICK DOUGLASS' NAVIGATION OF AMERICAN  
IDENTITY

A Thesis

by

DANIEL ERIC SOLIS

Submitted to Texas A&M International University  
in partial fulfillment of the requirements  
for the degree of

MASTER OF ARTS

May 2021

Major Subject: English

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May 2021

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## ABSTRACT

American in Principle: Frederick Douglass' Navigation of American Identity (May 2021)

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Chair of Committee: Dr. Jonathan W. Murphy

My Master's Thesis examines Frederick Douglass' definition of American identity by navigating through his struggle between his acknowledgement of American ideals and his exclusion from American society. As a fugitive slave in antebellum America, there was a tension for Douglass in adopting an identity that recognized American identity by principle. Starting with his anti-Constitution Garrisonian perspective, I venture through his written and orated works to present the gradual shift in his perspective on and attitude towards America. My first chapter examines Douglass' first two autobiographies to compare his changing opinions on America from 1845 to 1855. In *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, an American Slave* (1845), Douglass advocates for self-will, education, and literacy as a pathway to freedom. In contrast, in *My Bondage and My Freedom* (1855), Douglass emphasizes the role of political influence and communal action to combat slavery. Alongside selected journal entries and orations between the 1840s and 1850s, Douglass' changing political perspective is also indicated in his Fourth of July speech, "What to the Slave is the Fourth of July?" (1852). I argue that Douglass reconciled with his identity as a black man and as an American in his Fourth of July oration. He defines American identity in his speech by emphasizing the principles founded in the Constitution, the Declaration of Independence, and through the actions of the American revolutionaries. In doing so, Douglass illuminates the hypocrisy of the nation for not upholding

these virtues. Lastly, I argue that Douglass' novella, *The Heroic Slave* (1853), encapsulates his political voyage and life as a slave-turned-political orator, portraying his definition of Americanness through the actions of the main character, Madison Washington.

## DEDICATION

I dedicate my thesis to my parents, Federico and Angela Solis, as well as my older brother, Steven, my older sister, Amanda, and my (little) twin brother, David. Thank you for putting up with me and for always keeping me in check.

Writing this thesis wouldn't be possible if it weren't for my unrelenting faith in God. I wouldn't have had the patience, wisdom, and courage to pursue my graduate studies without Him.

Lastly, in spirit, I dedicate my thesis to Dr. Frances Gates Rhodes. Thank you for guiding me towards becoming a teacher (and for the jar of honey). I will never forget your lesson on education: have faith.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I want to show my appreciation for my loved ones in Heaven who have been watching over me during this journey. Also, I want to recognize Destiny and Hayley, our family dogs who were truly best friends of mine and were *always* there for me. Along with my family, I appreciate my dearest cousins, Sammy and Josh, and my best friend, Ricardo, for showing me what is profoundly important in life. I am grateful for all of my teachers who believed in my potential as a student and supported my determination to always better myself in every way. I also thank my basketball, band, and TAMIU friends, who have helped make me the man that I am today. I am grateful for my committee members, Dr. Manuel Broncano, Dr. Nathaniel Racine, and Dr. Ariadne Gonzalez, for pushing my knowledge and writing skills beyond the scope of literary scholarship. Finally, I want to express my deepest gratitude to Dr. Jonathan W. Murphy. Thank you for making me a resilient student in my academic studies, and, most of all, for signing me up for a journey that I will forever cherish.

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## CHAPTER I

### INTRODUCTION

The topic of American slavery is often regarded as an example of America's unforgivable past. On the other hand, the abolition of slavery is referred to as proof of American exceptionalism. There have been significant prevailing perspectives of American history. As the horrific history of slavery is rightfully considered in political discussions, the question of how American identity should be defined is also included. There are formidable disagreements on whether slavery should be highlighted as an influential and deterministic aspect in contemporary society—and, likewise, contemporary identities. It is therefore vital to rediscover, understand, and formulate perspectives of American identity by learning the story of Frederick Douglass, an American fugitive slave who became one of the most prominent patriotic voices of America. As Douglass was a slave, he had every reason to not believe in the country and to not consider himself an American. Although he could have considered himself an American because of his place of birth, Douglass eventually identified as an American through his definitions of the national identity in his works. Douglass recognized and reemphasized the American principles written in the founding documents, which established a new viewpoint in judging the nation and its identity by its principles rather than by race; however, he did not always hold this perspective. Douglass had underwent a political shift after his escape from slavery. His initial views expressed his inability to identify himself as an American because of the injustices of institutionalized slavery, and he had called for the destruction of the foundational institutions and documents of the United States. However, later within the same decade, not only did Douglass

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This thesis follows the model of *Arizona Quarterly*.

accept America as his own country, but he articulated and defended the principles embodied in the Constitution and the Declaration of Independence. Rather than rejecting the country and its founding values, Douglass demanded that he and other enslaved Americans be offered equal rights with such principles.

Douglass' writings and speeches tell the story of an American patriot, as they express his perspectives of the main tenets of American society: individual rights, patriotism, and liberty. By virtue of his experiences and attitudes about the nation, despite its horrific practices, Douglass ultimately defined America not by its actions, but by the values founded in the Declaration of Independence and the Constitution. My aim in this thesis is to present a unique voice in the discussion of American slavery and to analyze Douglass' vision of American identity.

Before I discuss Douglass' views on American identity, I examine his opinions on America. In my first chapter, I identify Douglass' views on America by examining the way he described his fight for freedom in his first two autobiographies, *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, an American Slave* (1845) and *My Bondage and My Freedom* (1855). Separated by a decade of shifting political views, analyzing Douglass' autobiographies is crucial in identifying his changing opinions about the U.S. *Narrative* showcases a young fugitive slave in 1845. *My Bondage* depicts an influential political orator in 1855. Considered alongside his other letters that Douglass wrote during this decade, the distinctions between both autobiographies reflect his changing perspectives on America.

The first section of Chapter 1 shows Douglass' initial opinions on America in *Narrative* through his individual approach in fighting for his liberty. In his first autobiography, Douglass pushed for self-reliant actions to attain his freedom. His emphasis on independent actions is shown by the major pathways that led to his freedom: being unmanageable and practicing

resistance, becoming literate, and being insistent on securing his freedom. Concerning his perspective on America, Douglass seldom discusses politics, the Constitution, or the Declaration of Independence. When he does mention politics, he alludes to it only to cast politicians in a negative light by comparing them to Colonel Lloyd's slaves who sought to "please their overseers" (23). While he does not specifically mention politics, his opinions on Christianity in America reflect his views on America as a whole. He maintains that Christianity itself is not corrupt. Rather, the religion of the land, American Christianity, is corrupt. Douglass' nuanced approach to Christianity is later reflected in his opinions on American democracy. The foundational principles inscribed in the Declaration of Independence and the Constitution are not corrupt (notwithstanding the corruption introduced by the Constitution with regards to the legal enshrinement of the American slave trade). Douglass celebrated the ideal principles of the young republic, but he abhorred the actual practice of American democracy, which abused and undermined these founding principles.

The next section of Chapter One analyzes different speeches and writings from Douglass that indicate his changing political views. I examine how Douglass came to his pro-Constitution perspective by analyzing his change in perspective from when he wrote *Narrative* in 1845 to when *My Bondage* was published ten years after. I first look at Douglass' rightfully skeptical perspective of the country during the mid-1840s after *Narrative* was written. His letters to William Lloyd Garrison show his strongly negative opinions of the U.S. These letters, along with a few speeches he delivered during this time, highlight his anti-Constitutional perspective on America. By analyzing his subsequent letters and speeches in the early 1850s, I highlight Douglass' separation from his Garrisonian political position, as well as his changing attitudes toward the Constitution, the Declaration of Independence, and his general patriotism for the U.S.

In the last section of my first chapter, I discuss Douglass' second autobiography, *My Bondage and My Freedom*. In *My Bondage*, Douglass has a more optimistic view of America compared to his opinions shown in *Narrative*. This is shown by his emphasis on the role of the community and in the fight against slavery. He demands respect for enslaved Americans, which is more than just sympathy, and he portrays his resistance to slavery as a collective social responsibility. Douglass also places the responsibility of slaves' brute conditions and behavior on America and its institutions. He contrasts his once anti-American perspective by emphasizing the utility of the founding documents and their political clout to help combat slavery. Douglass' new political positions are shown in *My Bondage* through his discussion of politics, America's founding documents, and the role of African Americans in the U.S.

In the field of research for *Narrative*, many scholars argue that the first autobiography serves as a depiction of Douglass acting out his self-will. William L. Andrews, a professor of English at The University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, points to Douglass' account of his rise from slavery to freedom as a dramatization of a "ritual of socialization" common in early-nineteenth century literature (qtd. in Andrews 135). He explains that this can be identified in literature when "the rebellion of a fractious individual against instituted authority is translated into a heroic act of self-reliance, a reenactment of the national myth of regeneration and progress through revolution" (135). These descriptions are similar to the way Douglass recounts his experiences in his autobiography. Douglass' fight for freedom, by becoming unmanageable and learning how to read and write to his eventual escape, depicts his life story as an effort in self-reliance. When Douglass wrote *Narrative*, following his escape from slavery, he had little hope or intention of relying upon the community or the political institutions of the U.S. government to

combat slavery. Thus, he maintained during the early 1840s that the slave must accomplish and defend their individual rights through self-reliance.

Research for *My Bondage* suggests that Douglass deviated from portraying his fight against slavery as an independent act to a more communal effort. Thomas De Pietro notes the importance of comparing the two autobiographies to discern Douglass' changing perspectives. De Pietro highlights an important change in Douglass' line of thinking. He claims that *My Bondage*, "adds to the original story both a lengthy explanation of the *Liberator's* direct influence on his antislavery consciousness and an impassioned indictment of slavery as a system, not as a fiendish test of his individual will" (385). Douglass' emphasis upon politics and public opinion in *My Bondage* shows his changed views on abolitionism and the Constitution.

In my second chapter, I examine Douglass' tension in supporting American principles while being rejected by the country in "What to the Slave is the Fourth of July?" (1852). In his most famous speech, Douglass expresses nuanced views on American institutions and its founding principles, similar to his nuanced approach to Christianity in his *Narrative*. Douglass acknowledges the principles that are defined in the Declaration of Independence in his speech, as he cites the principles of "Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness" (U.S. 1776). While Douglass does not quote the Constitution in his speech, he defends the values of the document, which insure to "form a more perfect Union, establish justice, insure domestic Tranquility, provide for the common defence, promote the general Welfare, and secure the Blessings of Liberty to ourselves and our Posterity" (U.S. 1787). Seeking to remove whiteness from the nation's identity, Douglass presents his new view by commending the principles of the founding documents and the actions of the American revolutionaries as defining characteristics of American identity. To encapsulate his sense of American identity, Douglass' central argument in

his speech, of course, is that the founder's ideals are not upheld by the American public and its institutions. Douglass conveys his previous views on America by reminding the audience that the country is wicked for not regarding him as a citizen nor as a fellow man. He emphasizes the country's practice of slavery, the internal slave trade, the Fugitive Slave Law, and the responsibility that the Church had in slavery continuing in America ("What to the Slave?" 202-218). He points out the hypocrisy of Americans who uphold the identity of the oppressed revolutionaries while siding with the oppressive institutions of slavery. Regardless of his acknowledgement and advocacy for American principles, Douglass scolds the listening audience for allowing slavery to persist. He argues that the Fourth of July celebration is not his to enjoy, and that he would be recognized as an American if the country truly lived by its founding principles (204). The speech thus highlights Douglass' conception of American principles while also expressing his struggle in accepting them as a black man and an escaped slave. However, he also argues that there are exceptions to America's wrong doings, and that those exceptions should be accounted for in the fight against slavery. Rather than exempting himself from the principles represented in America's founding documents, Douglass juxtaposes the essence of these principles with their perverted and incomplete realization in the United States. Douglass presents himself both as an African American and as an American, and thus blurs the borders of blackness and whiteness in the determining of American national identity.

In the scholarship on Douglass' Fourth of July speech, scholars have observed his political changes from a Garrisonian perspective of America to a more textual and organic conception of the country that utilized politics as a way to persuade his listeners. Kevin R. McClure presents a fruitful discussion of Douglass' change of mind about the U.S. in his speech. Douglass not only shows his appreciation of the U.S. Constitution, the Declaration of

Independence, and America's revolutionary history in his speech, but he also declares that these things are relevant for all people, including enslaved Americans. Douglass came to this new perspective after seeing that using the Constitution as an anti-slavery document would "furnish him with new argumentative strategies and persuasive resources in his rhetorical struggle over the meaning of the American Revolution" (McClure 426). In doing so, Douglass redefined what American principles are by insisting that the rights and liberties of America are entitled to African Americans as well.

In my final chapter, I examine how Douglass' novella, *The Heroic Slave* (1853), serves to amalgamate Douglass' changing political views and to showcase his definition of American identity as raceless. Through the main character, Madison Washington, Douglass narrates the story of his own political metamorphosis. The novella portrays Douglass' nuanced approach to Christianity, his independent and eventual communal response to slavery, and finally, his conclusion that American identity should be defined by one's actions and principles, and not by race. In the story, Madison acknowledges the fight for liberty much like Douglass. In doing so, Madison illuminates the hypocrisy of American society for allowing its principles to be undermined, abused, and withheld from men on the basis of race. Upon taking control of the *Creole*, a Virginia slave brig en route to New Orleans, Madison points out to Tom Grant the hypocrisy of calling him a black murderer when all he had done was what the founders did when they fought for their liberty (*The Heroic Slave* 190). His assertion links Madison's actions as an African American with the actions of the founding fathers and revolutionaries. Thus, Madison's life, like Douglass', represents an African American experience that is simultaneously an American experience. By emphasizing the values that Douglass identified in American

principles, my thesis aims to showcase an American chronicle that captures an ex-slave's turn to patriotism.

## CHAPTER II

### *NARRATIVE OF THE LIFE OF FREDERICK DOUGLASS, AN AMERICAN SLAVE, AND MY BONDAGE AND MY FREEDOM: A CHANGE OF VISIONS*

After escaping slavery, Douglass rightfully had critical opinions about the U.S. when writing his first autobiography. He not only criticized the institutions and practices that allowed slavery, but he outright dismissed the country as not being his own. His perspective was justified by arguing that the foundational documents of the U.S. supported slavery. His views were influenced by the anti-Constitution stance of William Lloyd Garrison and other abolitionists. Douglass' intelligence, rhetorical prowess, and most importantly, his experiences with slavery convinced Garrison to employ him as an anti-slavery lecturer. After Douglass joined Garrison on the abolitionist lecture circuit, and as a writer for the *Liberator*, he expressed his negative opinion of the country that had enslaved him. Although Douglass had gone so far as to show that he had been enslaved by showing "his audiences the stripes on his back," many people "refused to believe that he had ever been a slave because they thought that he spoke too well and too learnedly" (Boxill 302). To prove his past to the public, Douglass wrote and published *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, an American Slave*, in 1845. In his first autobiography, Douglass' views on America are represented by how he narrates his escape from slavery. Douglass could not accept the country and its institutions as his own since it excluded him from the same freedoms it championed. He argued that it is the responsibility of the slave to combat the institution of slavery. The first section of this chapter showcases *Narrative* as a blueprint that shares the tools needed to combat slavery independently: by being unmanageable, becoming literate, and championing the idea of freedom represented in America's founding documents. Besides the general abomination of slavery, Douglass does not overtly discuss politics or

government institutions in the autobiography. When he does mention politics, he casts politicians in a negative light by comparing them to Colonel Lloyd's slaves, who sought to "please their overseers" (23). Instead of focusing on politics, Douglass expresses his critical opinion of the U.S. by bemoaning the perversion of Christian values and institutions by the perpetrators of slavery. However, rather than dismissing Christianity outright because of his experiences with American Christianity, Douglass keeps his faith in Christian ideals. Douglass' ability to distinguish the hypocritical practice of Christianity with true Christian faith reflects his later opinions on the Constitution, in which he supports the ideas of the founding document abuse of them in actual practice. The next section studies the change in Douglass' political perspectives in his letters and speeches over a ten-year period. Douglass' departure from Garrison and other anti-Constitution abolitionists marks the turning point in his political views. By 1855, Douglass expresses a more hopeful view of America in his second autobiography, as he emphasized the importance of the community and the responsibilities of American institutions to end the burden of slavery. The final section of this chapter examines his new position on America after his publication of *Narrative* ten years earlier. Not only does Douglass discuss politics in *My Bondage*, but he expresses his new perspective on the Constitution, one that emphasizes its significance as an argumentative tool to defend the rights of enslaved Americans. While his political views emphasize individual rights in both autobiographies, primarily focusing on people's liberties and their responsibility to combat the effects of slavery themselves, Douglass recognizes that communal and political actions are just as important in his later writings.

### ***Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, an American Slave***

In *Narrative*, Douglass stresses the rights and values due to all individuals, emphasizing the importance of individual responsibility to attain their rights. As Micki Archuleta states,

“Douglass works in a tradition of liberalism to advance African American slaves’ claim to individual rights,” and demands the recognition of “individual dignity” and “the integrity of all individuals, regardless of condition” (38). To defend one’s own liberty—even when death may be a consequence of it—is crucial in securing a person’s freedom as a human being born with unalienable rights and privileges. Meanwhile, Douglass did not regard any interest in American institutions assisting in the fight against slavery. Douglass’ only mention of politics shows his critical opinions about American democracy. He refers to the high esteem held by slaves who worked in “the Great House Farm” and draws a parallel between slaves who longed to be a worker in *the Great House Farm* to politicians who sought to please their parties. Douglass states, “The competitors for this office sought as diligently to please their overseers, as the office-seekers in the political parties seek to please and deceive the people. The same traits of character might be seen in Colonel Lloyd’s slaves, as are seen in the slaves of the political parties” (23). Rather than discussing politics, Douglass instead focused solely on his independent fight against slavery.

This independent fight is shown in *Narrative* when Douglass notes the significance in becoming “unmanageable,” which reflects a view that stresses the individual’s responsibility to maintain their personal rights and liberties. He illustrates this action when he recalls the murder of Demby, a fellow slave. As Douglass explains, after being whipped by Mr. Gore three times, Demby “plunged himself to a creek, and stood there at the depth of his shoulders, refusing to come out” (29). In response, Mr. Gore warned Demby that he would shoot him if he refused to get out of the creek. Ultimately, as Demby did not come out of the creek after the third call was made, Mr. Gore shot him with his musket, killing him right where he stood (29). After being asked by Colonel Lloyd why he shot Demby, Mr. Gore gives a response that Douglass later

refers to in describing what a slave ought to do to gain their freedom: Mr. Gore explains that “Demby had become unmanageable,” and was therefore “setting a dangerous example to the other slaves” (30). According to Mr. Gore, Demby’s resistance, if not severely punished, could have led to the “freedom of the slaves, and the enslavement of the whites” (30). Douglass seized upon Demby’s tragic act of resistance, as it provided him with insight in how to gain one’s own freedom.

Becoming literate was another pathway that led to Douglass’ freedom. When Mr. Hugh Auld instructs his wife, Sophia Auld, not to teach Douglass how to read, his argument is that if a slave became literate, it would “forever unfit him to be a slave,” as he would “at once become unmanageable and of no value to his master” (37). As Douglass listened to Mr. Auld’s argument, it illuminated a new line of thinking for him. Astounded by what he had heard, Douglass states that Mr. Auld’s warning had “called into existence an entirely new train of thought. It was a new and special revelation”; in that moment, he “understood the pathway from slavery to freedom” (37). Just as Mr. Auld had warned Mrs. Auld, however, learning to read did bring unhappiness and discontent to Douglass, as he gained more insight on his grave circumstances as a slave. Douglass eventually taught himself how to read, which led him to further understand the nature of freedom through the radical teachings of resistance that he found in *The Columbian Orator* (1797). Granville Ganter, of St. John’s University, explains that “Bingham's *Columbian Orator* [...] promoted an understanding of virtue that was informed by a tradition of Christian radicalism” (465). Douglass read the book with “unabated interest” as he went through Sheridan’s speeches on “behalf of Catholic emancipation,” which presented him with a new perspective and stirred “interesting thoughts of [his] own soul” (*Narrative* 41). According to Ganter’s descriptions of *The Columbian Orator*, the book “strives to conserve the volatile

aspects of Revolutionary ideology” by affirming the “capability of speech—the preaching of righteous gospel—to usher in the millennium” (475).

*The Columbian Orator* had a profound influence on Douglass because it taught him about radical resistance. He notes the impact the book had on him, especially since it addressed issues that directly concerned his own circumstances as a slave:

I found in it a dialogue between a master and his slave. The slave was represented as having run away from his master three times. The dialogue represented the conversation which took place between them, when the slave was retaken the third time. In this dialogue, the whole argument in behalf of slavery was brought forward by the master, all of which was disposed of by the slave. The slave was made to say some very smart as well as impressive things in reply to his master—things which had the desired though unexpected effect; for the conversation resulted in the voluntary emancipation of the slave on the part of the master. (41)

As a result of his readings, Douglass’ newfound awareness of his conditions as a slave instilled in him a sense of “unutterable anguish” (42). However, by learning about the master and slave debate in *The Columbian Orator*, Douglass gained knowledge of “the power of truth over the conscience of even a slaveholder” (*Narrative* 41). A passage from “Dialogue Between a Master and Slave” in *The Columbian Orator* states:

You have reduced them [slaves] to the state of brute beasts; and if they have not the stupidity of beasts of burden, they must have the ferocity of beasts of prey. Superior force alone can give you security. As soon as that fails, you are at the mercy of the merciless. Such is the social bond between master and slave! (Blight 212)

Reading *The Columbian Orator* influenced Douglass’ understanding of his life as a slave, which drove his interest to learn how to overcome his conditions.

As a young man, Douglass became intent upon learning more about abolitionists, noting his excitement and willingness to learn more about freedom:

The silver trump of freedom had roused my soul to eternal wakefulness. Freedom now appeared, to disappear no more forever. It was heard in every sound, and seen in every thing. It was ever present to torment me with a sense of my

wretched condition. I saw nothing without seeing it, I heard nothing without hearing it, and felt nothing without feeling it. It looked from every star, it smiled in every calm, breathed in every wind, and moved in every storm. (42)

Douglass' literacy enabled him to learn about ideas that stimulated his eagerness to obtain his freedom. Some scholars argue that learning and duplicating the language and discourse of the white general public ultimately displaced Douglass from the slave community. Daniel J. Royer discusses this matter by referring to the arguments of Houston A. Baker Jr. and Thad Ziolkowski. As Baker points out, "Douglass's 'authentic' self is distanced from the authentic voice of black American slavery to the extent that that voice is one 'of a self transformed by an autobiographical act into a sharer in the general public discourse about slavery'" (qtd. in Royer 365). Royer, however, argues against this confining argument, as he states that "we need not accept the prevailing assumptions that literacy for Douglass involved social betrayal, psychological escape, or any sort of dialectical movement away from his identity rooted in traditional black slave culture" (367). Rather than claiming that Douglass' literacy and speaking capabilities were defined by and therefore bound him to white society's cultural sphere, Royer claims that people "do not simply step out of one culture and into another when they 'become literate.' Reacting creatively to a new situation involves, in part, achieving a deeper understanding of one's present situation" (367). Douglass' literacy and his public speaking capacity were uncommon for a black fugitive slave, but this did not alienate him from the enslaved people he represented in his discourse.

Douglass's self-education enabled him to recognize and articulate the foundational principles of American democracy, such as universal liberty and individual rights. However, while Douglass maintained his faith in these values, he had learned to distrust them because of how they were abused by slave owners. Douglass recalls certain occasions when slaveholders

'permitted' holidays for the slaves to instill false impressions of freedom and liberty. These holidays, however, were only intended to diminish any growing feelings of revolt and insurrection. Douglass states that "[t]hese holidays serve[d] as conductors, or safety-valves, to carry off the rebellious spirit of enslaved humanity" (*Narrative* 65). As Douglass suggests, if slaves were not given holidays to alleviate the spirit of insurrection, there would be little doubt that they would inevitably revolt in due time. Therefore, not only were holidays given to prevent any sparks of rebellion among the slaves, but they also subverted the experience of true freedom and liberty for those who were enslaved. Slave owners understood that polluting the idea of 'freedom' with negative experiences would cause slaves to be ignorant of true freedom. Douglass describes instances when slave owners would play drinking games with their slaves to make them intoxicated (65). Doing so would make their slaves extremely drunk under the guise of a holiday celebration, leading them to associate freedom—that is, being momentarily free of slave labor—with intoxication. Douglass explains, "the slaveholders like to have their slaves spend those days just in such a manner as to make them as glad of their ending as of their beginning [...] to disgust their slaves with freedom, by plunging them into the lowest depths of dissipation" (65). If this association was instilled promptly, the slaveholder would have successfully "cheat[ed] him with a dose of vicious dissipation, artfully labelled with the name of liberty" (65). As a result, slaves were led to believe that "there was little to choose between liberty and slavery" (65).

The forced negative associations of freedom and liberty extended to personal beliefs as well, and especially religious faith. Douglass maintained his Christian faith as he supported the ideas of Christianity but criticized the perverted religion of the South. James Trotman notes Douglass' distinctions in his criticism of Christianity. He states that "his abolitionist supporters

pushed him to clarify his position in the Appendix, fearing that some readers might come away from the book thinking that Douglass was against Christianity. He answered cryptically by separating what he called ‘the impartial Christianity of Christ’ from those who participated in making alliances between religion and slavery” (94). In his *Narrative*, Douglass points out the hypocrisy of “Christian” slave owners by recalling his experiences with Captain Thomas Auld and his family. Captain Auld and his wife would pray to God to bless them in “basket and store,” even though they were aware that food “in abundance lay in the safe and smoke-house,” while Douglass and their other slaves were “perishing with hunger” (50). Along with blatant hypocritical practices, Douglass associated religion with violent behavior. He comes to this assessment upon seeing Captain Thomas Auld’s change in character after he “experienced religion” at a Methodist camp-meeting (51). Douglass initially had hoped that this might change Auld’s character for the better, but he instead found that “after his conversion, he found religious sanction and support for his slaveholding cruelty” (51). He makes reference to an instance when Captain Auld whipped a woman while quoting a passage in the *Bible* (52). Furthermore, slave owners understood that a true Christian faith could be a threat to their “domestic institution.” Because of this, black slaves were not allowed to learn and to read the *Bible*, despite their admiration and interest in Christianity (51-52). Douglass decided to help other slaves read the *Bible*, showing that Douglass was not only invested in Christianity through his personal faith, but he also taught fellow black slaves about the *Bible* in private church sermons (69-70). Douglass was, however, opposed to the general perversion of Christianity in America. He therefore cautions his readers in the Appendix of his *Narrative*:

What I have said respecting and against religion, I mean strictly to apply to the slaveholding religion of this land, and with no possible reference to Christianity proper [...] I love the pure, peaceable, and impartial Christianity of Christ: I therefore hate the corrupt, slaveholding, women-whipping, cradle-plundering,

partial and hypocritical Christianity of this land. Indeed, I can see no reason, but the most deceitful one, for calling the religion of this land Christianity. (94-95)

Despite his denunciation of the hypocritical and violent expressions of the Christian faith of the South, Douglass still saw the value and necessity of his personal faith.

Douglass professes his religious faith in several places in his *Narrative*. While working as a slave on Auld's farm, Douglass looks out onto Chesapeake Bay and desperately contemplates his belief in God. He pleads, "O God, save me! God, deliver me! Let me be free! Is there any God? Why am I a slave?" (58). He attributes his ability to escape slavery to "God helping [him]" (58). Douglass' personal prayer by Chesapeake Bay indicates that his faith helped him to maintain hope in his eventual escape. Throughout *Narrative*, Douglass' attributes his Christian faith in God as a factor in surviving slavery. For instance, Douglass describes his move from Colonel Lloyd's plantation as "one of the most interesting events of [his] life," as he felt that he would still have been enslaved otherwise:

It is possible, and even quite probable, that but for the mere circumstance of being removed from that plantation to Baltimore, I should have to-day, instead of being here seated by my own table, in the enjoyment of freedom and the happiness of home, writing this Narrative, been confined in the galling chains of slavery. (35)

Douglass not only saw his move to Baltimore as "one of the most interesting events of [his] life," but he also regarded it as "a special interposition of divine Providence in [his] favor" (35). His move to Baltimore would, after all, eventually lead to him learning how to read and write.

Notwithstanding his negative experiences of the slave-holding religion of the South, Douglass preserved a faith in his Christian beliefs and in the value of freedom. Moreover, he remained determined to fight for what was right for the country despite being rejected from it. He does so by pointing out the hypocrisies and insufficiencies of American institutions that undermined its foundational values. Despite the enslavement of black people in the U.S.,

Douglass argued that the country would inevitably have to reconcile with the growing population of black and “mullato” children. Not only did he argue that enslaved African Americans would then be American-born, but many black children, like himself, would be born from a white parent. Douglass did not argue this point so much to proclaim the U.S. as his own country, nor to prove his ties to whiteness because of his white father. Rather, he used this argument to delegitimize American slavery:

Whether or not this prophecy is ever fulfilled or not, it is nevertheless plain that a very different-looking class of people are springing up at the south, and are now held in slavery, from those originally brought to this country from Africa; and if their increase do no other good, it will do away the force of the argument, that God cursed Ham, and therefore American slavery is right. If the lineal descendants of Ham are alone to be scripturally enslaved, it is certain that slavery at the south must soon become unscriptural; for thousands are ushered into the world, annually, who, like myself, owe their existence to white fathers, and those fathers most frequently their own masters. (17)

Douglass’ criticisms of American society, religion, and democracy shows his growing attention on the state of the country. However, his letters to Garrison in subsequent years indicate that he was nonetheless skeptical of the country.

### **Beyond *Narrative***

After the publication of *Narrative*, Douglass maintained a negative view of American patriotism. In a letter to Garrison, Douglass explains, “That men should be patriotic is to me perfectly natural; and as a philosophical fact, I am able to give it an intellectual recognition. But no further can I go. If ever I had any patriotism, or any capacity for the feeling, it was whipt out of me long since by the lash of the American soul-drivers” (“Douglass to William Lloyd Garrison” January 1, 1846). Although Douglass’ views on America had gradually evolved since writing *Narrative*, he maintained his argument that since African Americans were rejected and enslaved in American society, they thus had no reason to love the country as their own. Later the

same year, while still condemning the U.S., Douglass expressed a more positive view of the country. In his letter, “America’s Compromise with Slavery and the Abolitionists’ Work,” Douglass states, “Aside from slavery [,] I regard America as a brilliant example to the world; only wash from her escutcheon the bloody stain of slavery, and she will stand forth as a noble example for others to follow” (April 6, 1846). However, he was doubtful of any potential institutional changes, and thus argued that “as long as the tears of my sisters and brother continue to run down her streams unheeded into the vast ocean of human misery, my tongue shall cleave to the roof of my mouth ere I speak as well of a nation” (April 6, 1846). In the following year, Douglass maintained a strong animosity towards the country and refused to celebrate it. In his speech, “Love of God, Love of Man, Love of Country” (September 24, 1847), Douglass rebukes the idea of celebrating the U.S. so long as slavery is still practiced. He states, “No, I make no pretension to patriotism. So long as my voice can be heard on this or the other side of the Atlantic, I shall hold up America to the lightning scorn of moral indignation. In doing this, I shall feel myself discharging the duty of a true patriot; for he is a lover of his country who rebukes and does not excuse its sins” (1847). Douglass may thus be considered a dissenting or critical patriot at this time.

Douglass’ rejection of America developed even further as he saw many threats to re-enslave him brought by the fame of his autobiography. Not only did he argue that he could have no patriotism for America, but he also argued that he could not love it, although he did not resort to his initial explanation of not having patriotism by simply not belonging to the country. As Bernard R. Boxill claims, Douglass “often maintained that he had and could have no patriotism” (301). Douglass distinctly emphasized that he could not love the U.S. at all, whether or not he saw it as his own country. As Boxill points out, “One can love a country even if it is not one’s

country, though one cannot, of course, love it in the way that a patriot loves his country” (302). To go beyond his initial claim that America was not his country, Douglass argued that the U.S. was “simply too wicked for him to love” (302). As an ex-slave, he knew that the U.S. would continue to be wicked to him and others like him. His *Narrative* had served its purpose by proving Douglass’ past as a slave, but it also “revealed who he was, thus making it possible for his master Thomas Auld to send slave catchers up North to bring him back to Maryland and slavery” (Boxill 302). In one of his addresses in New York, “Country, Conscience, and the Anti-Slavery Cause,” Douglass reflects on his experience leaving America:

This had deeply incensed them against me and stirred up within them the purpose of revenge, and, my whereabouts being known, I believed it necessary for me, if I would preserve my liberty, to leave the shores of America and take up my abode in some other land, at least until the excitement occasioned by the publication of my *Narrative* had subsided. (May 13, 1847)

With the realization of his potential re-enslavement, Douglass decided to flee the U.S. to the British Isles. In the same New York address, he explains his justification in fleeing the country:

I went to England, Monarchical England, to get rid of Democratic Slavery, and I must confess that, at the very threshold, I was satisfied that I had gone to the right place. Say what you will of England—of the degradation—of the poverty—and there is much of it there—say what you will of the oppression and suffering going on in England at this time, there is Liberty there, there is Freedom there, not only for the white man but for the black man also. (1847)

On a ship to Dublin, Ireland, Douglass wrote to Garrison that while there were many fruitful discussions about abolitionism, there were also poor arguments being made by slaveholders. They complained that “argument was no longer any means of defence”, so they had “resorted to their old a natural mode of defending their morality by brute force” (“To William Lloyd Garrison” September 1, 1845). Douglass complained that the pitiful arguments made in favor of slavery were enough to “make a slave ashamed of the country that enslaved him, to think of it. Without the slightest pretensions to patriotism [...] the conduct of the mobocratic Americans on

board the *Cambria* [ship] almost made me ashamed to say I had run away from such a country” (1845). Douglass’ rejection of patriotism extended to an overall rejection of America, as he was even ashamed of leaving the country.

Overall, while Douglass’ view of America had grown since his publication of *Narrative*, Douglass still rejected the U.S. as his country. The only attachment he had with the U.S. was his family and his “painful consciousness that here there are 3,000,000 of [his] fellow creatures groaning beneath the iron rod of the worst despotism that could be devised even in Pandemonium” (“Country, Conscience” 1847). This indicated the “early phase of Douglass's public career, especially between 1841 and 1847” when he “whole-heartedly embraced the principles and philosophy of this faction of abolitionists” (qtd. in Garvey par. 2). As T. G. Garvey explains, after Douglass discovered the Anti-Slavery Society at the Nantucket Anti-Slavery Convention of 1841, he already had the “spirit of the movement” within him and had only needed to “understand its principles and measures” (par. 2). Douglass’ initial perspective of American politics and the U.S. Constitution had been identical to Garrison’s in the years following his escape from slavery, which demanded all people to “repudiate the Declaration of Independence” and “brand Washington, and Adams, and Jefferson, and Hancock, as fanatics and madmen” (Garrison 188-189). Furthermore, upon his return to the United States in 1847, Douglass made an address in New York which explained his stance on the Constitution. On this occasion, he stated, “I have not, I cannot have, any love for this country, as such, or for its Constitution. I desire to see it overthrown as speedily as possible and its Constitution shivered in a thousand fragments, rather than that this foul curse should continue to remain as now” (“Country, Conscience” 1847). While Douglass rightfully kept his critical views of the country

and the Constitution in the years following his escape from slavery, his views saw a shift after he disbanded from the Garrisonian abolitionist faction.

Douglass continued to express his frustrations with the U.S. after his departure from the U.S. and he held views similar to those espoused by William Lloyd Garrison. According to Nick Bromell, Garrison was an absolutist who rejected perspectivism and maintained that “something cannot be itself and its opposite at the same time” (706). As a Garrisonian, Douglass also “based his arguments on the assumption that opposites cannot be yoked” (706). In the *North Star*, Douglass writes about his insistence that the Constitution cannot be supported because of its contradicting ideas:

Liberty and Slavery—opposite as Heaven and Hell—are both in the Constitution; and the oath to support the latter, is an oath to perform that which God has made impossible. [...] This fundamental contradiction in the Constitution is the real cause of the present storm-tossed condition of the public mind. [...] We must continue to hold, for the present, that the Constitution, being at war with itself, cannot be lived up to; and what we cannot do, we ought not to swear to do; and that, therefore, the platform for us to occupy, is outside that piece of parchment. (“Oath to Support the Constitution” 1850)

Douglass thus sustained a Garrisonian political perspective throughout the 1840s, unable to accept the Constitution and the country for its hypocritical views and practices. However, by 1851, Douglass gradually began to deviate from this view. Rather than ignoring politics, just as Garrison “downplayed politics,” Douglass underscored universal emancipation without ignoring other social and political issues, such as women’s rights and the labor movement, ultimately depicting a community that “transcended the nation-state and envisioned ‘all rights for all’” through his writings and speeches (Stauffer and Gates xxxii). His new approach contradicted that of Garrison and other abolitionists, as their movement was primarily fixed on the state of the U.S. and wanted “no union with slaveholders” (qtd. in Douglass, *My Bondage* 182). Concerning his stance on the Constitution, in 1851, Douglass had changed his opinion about the document,

convinced by “the arguments of Gerrit Smith and the political abolitionists,” which resulted in his “bitter break” with Garrison and the American Anti-Slavery Society (McClure 426). He discussed his new perspective on the Constitution in “Change of Opinion Announced” (May 15, 1851), in the *North Star*:

A careful study of the writings of Lysander Spooner, of Gerrit Smith, and of William Goodell, has brought us to our present conclusion. We found, in our former position, that, when debating the question, we were compelled to go behind the letter of the Constitution, and to seek its meaning in the history and practice of the nation under it [...] In short, we hold it [slavery] to be a system of lawless violence; that it *never was lawful, and never can be made so*; and that it is the first duty of American citizen, whose conscience permits so to do, to use his *political* as well as his *moral* power for its overthrow. (174)

Not only did Douglass’ change of view on the Constitution separate him from the Garrisonian perspective, it also reflected Douglass’ nuanced approach to American institutions and its founding documents.

Douglass had a masterful ability to articulate and decry the political views that did not support the abolition of slavery. Peter A. Dorsey highlights his rhetoric as one of the determining factors that eventually separated him from Garrison. He states that “Douglass's emerging literary virtuosity was inseparable from his growing independence as an abolitionist leader. It is not surprising, then, that his highly figurative style both illuminates and reflects his ideological shift from moral suasion to political abolitionism and his break with William Lloyd Garrison” (437). Influenced by the arguments of Gerrit Smith, William Goodell, and Samuel E. Sewall of the Liberty Party, Douglass left the Garrisonian perspective (McClure 426). Instead, Douglass adopted a new position of the Constitution and argued that the Constitution was an anti-slavery document that was framed upon the Declaration of Independence (Boxill 314).

His pro-Constitution position came about in the late 1840s when he began to integrate and emphasize the negative impacts of slavery on the American public that were not exclusive to

slaves. While the influences of Garrison and Wendell Phillips had initially given Douglass an unfavorable view of the Constitution, different political voices who had anti-slavery readings of the document ultimately convinced Douglass that “Garrison and Phillips were mistaken in claiming that the Constitution was pro-slavery” (Boxill 303). Douglass eventually adopted this point of view, not only arguing that the Constitution was not pro-slavery, but that it can be read and interpreted as being “radically anti-slavery” (303). With this perspective, Douglass took a similar position to that of President Abraham Lincoln, describing the Constitution as a “picture of silver” that was framed around the Declaration of Independence, which was regarded as an “apple of gold” (Boxill 314). Robert Cohen provides a different approach in determining how Douglass came to a different perspective on the Constitution. Unlike in Boxill’s explanation, Cohen emphasizes Douglass’ pro-slavery and anti-slavery readings of the Constitution. Cohen argues that despite these sentiments, Douglass came to a different interpretation of the document by emphasizing the “anti-slavery features in the Constitution” (249). Douglass had a new reading of the Constitution that posed a threat to the “democracy” of slaveholding. As Rachelle C. Prioleau states, Douglass’ new perspective “constructed a framework for his arguments that promoted freedom and democracy for all Americans,” after he started to express that slavery and racism represented a threat to “the constitutional liberties of every American” (180-181). This new framework would “force the nation to acknowledge the applicability of the American creed to all its citizens regardless of skin color and race,” as it sought to compare the “perceptions and practices of all Americans with the principles embodied in the Constitution” (181). Douglass thus saw the utility in applying the Constitution in the abolitionist movement. He therefore began to disband from Garrison and to “question his mentor’s belief that participation in the political system was immoral” (Garvey par. 3).

Inquiries about the Constitution led Douglass to not only question his beliefs about the founding document, but it also made him question his opinions about his perspective on the U.S. For instance, upon his departure to Ireland, Douglass notes his inability to praise America in any way in his letter, “Douglass to William Lloyd Garrison,” stating, “I hardly need say that, in speaking of Ireland, I shall be influenced by no prejudices ill favor of America. I think my circumstances all forbid that” (1846). However, within the same letter, Douglass expresses a significantly different reason as to why he cannot proclaim the U.S. as his country:

America will not allow her children to love her. She seems bent on compelling those who would be her warmest friends, to be her worst enemies. May God give her repentance, before it is too late, is the ardent prayer of my heart. I will continue to pray, labor, and wait, believing that she cannot always be insensible to the dictates of justice, or deaf to the voice of humanity. (1846)

Rather than outright abandoning the U.S. for its practice of slavery, Douglass showed a more moderate approach, expressing an inclination to appreciate and pray for the country. His approach differs greatly from how he described the country in his earliest writings after escaping slavery. He now advocates that African Americans may be accepted in American society and its institutions, rather than simply rejecting the U.S. entirely, as Garrison and other abolitionists advocated. Therefore, although he had maintained that he could not be a patriot of America for allowing slavery to persist, shortly after moving to England, Douglass “began to insist that the opposite was true,” as he “began to claim that the U.S. was his country, that he loved her and that he was a patriot” (Boxill 302).

There is a debate that surrounds Douglass’ sense of American identity and patriotism. Authors like Ivy G. Wilson argue that Douglass needed to be “selective about which elements of the nation’s cultural mythology he claims” as he wanted to “suggest that slavery is inconsistent with the nation, but its presence in the Americas for centuries hardly makes such a statement

possible” (456). While Wilson emphasizes Douglass’ nuanced approach in accepting America and its principles as his own, other authors, such as Bernard R. Boxill, argue that Douglass eventually acknowledged the U.S. as his own country after gaining a new perspective of the Constitution. While his new perspective of the U.S. was a drastic change from the point of view that he held upon writing *Narrative*, Douglass’ change of heart did not insinuate that the country was less wicked. In fact, he had believed that it had become more wicked after the passage of the Fugitive Slave Law of 1850, which “gave judges monetary incentives to find any blacks captured in the North to be escaped slaves, thus making every nominally free Black person in the U.S. liable to be kidnapped [...] and sent south into slavery” (Boxill 302-303). However, his indignations were indicative of Douglass’ growing gradual interest for the country. Douglass’ claim to the country and his acknowledgement of American values may not be sufficient to call him a patriot, but his patriotism is nonetheless evident through his criticisms of the nation (309). To explicate Douglass’ patriotism of the U.S., I turn to Boxill’s definition of patriotism as a reflection of how Douglass thought of the country. Boxill states that “criticism of the political system of one’s country has been taken to be the most obvious distinguishing mark if not the essence of the patriot,” and that “the political system is thus typically not the source of patriotism, though a concern for it is a typical result of patriotism” (309-310). Therefore, as Boxill argues, Douglass would have been less critical of the U.S. had he “been less of a patriot” (303).

### ***My Bondage and My Freedom***

Douglass’ involvement in American politics had not yet flourished by the time he wrote *My Bondage*. However, his concern had grown substantially from when he wrote *Narrative*. As Douglass’ second autobiography was published ten years after his *Narrative*, *My Bondage* offers

a point of reference to identify Douglass' change in political rhetoric and messaging. For instance, this change is apparent when juxtaposing his approach to the individual rights and communal responsibilities of slaves between his two autobiographies. Douglass still calls for the recognition of individual rights, but he also pushes for a "collective response in recognizing the systemic responsibility of the institution of slavery for the intellectually and morally impoverished condition of brutalized slaves" (Archuleta 38). Thus, in *My Bondage*, Douglass manifests his evolved perspective of the relationship with American ideals and its responsibility for slavery. He leaves his Garrisonian belief of dismantling and replacing America's fundamental institutions behind and instead emphasizes the community and American institutions as means to fight slavery. Douglass concluded that it was necessary to be involved in American politics to use its institutions and founding documents to fight slavery. He shows his insistence that the institutions and communities needed to be changed for black slaves. This shows a changed approach in how Douglass wanted slaves to combat slavery and how he wanted enslaved Americans to be represented to the American public. Acknowledging the role of American government to fight against slavery bridged the political gap that Douglass maintained by only emphasizing the role of the slave to fight against slavery in his *Narrative*. Douglass sought to shift the discourse and implications of slaves fighting for their liberties by placing the responsibility of their behavior on the social fabric and institutions of the U.S.

Rather than solely relying on the independent responsibility and acts of self-will to combat slavery, Douglass emphasizes the influence that politics has on the subject of slavery. This is indicated by his perspective on public opinion and the influence it has on politics. He states in *My Bondage* that public opinion "is not likely to very efficient in protecting the slave from cruelty. On the contrary, it must increase and intensify his wrongs. Public opinion seldom

differs very widely from public practice. To be a restraint upon cruelty and vice, public opinion must emanate from a humane and virtuous community” (76). Douglass expresses his apprehension towards public opinion, but his expressed concern indicates his growing emphasis upon the community’s responsibility in the fight against slavery. He further indicates his communal approach when he emphasizes the role that politics can have in changing the public’s opinion of slavery. He uses voting as an example of an essential tool in the fight against slavery. He explains, “to abstain from voting, was to refuse to exercise a legitimate and powerful means for abolishing slavery” (*My Bondage* 468). Furthermore, Douglass insists that utilizing the Constitution can be of great use, as “the Constitution of the United States not only contained no guarantees in favor of slavery, but, on the contrary, it is, in its letter and spirit, an anti-slavery instrument, demanding the abolition of slavery as a condition of its own existence, as the supreme law of the land” (468). Douglass’ emphasis upon individual rights was subject to and dependent on his increasingly positive view of communal action and the Constitution. He still demanded the recognition of slaves’ individual rights, but he increasingly pushed for “a collective response in recognizing the systemic responsibility of the institution of slavery for the intellectually and morally impoverished condition of brutalized slaves” (Archuleta 38). Archuleta underlines this shift in Douglass’ focus, stating that “by 1855, Douglass basically presumes that a constituted and legally consistent society must grant individuals ‘freedom of choice’ as a necessary ground for demanding moral and legal accountability from its members” (39). By acknowledging the premise that individuals are “constitutional agents” who belong to a larger community, Douglass “implicitly advocates individual responsibility for and obligation to that community” (Archuleta 36). Douglass supplemented his emphasis on individual rights in his *Narrative*, but he places greater stress on the communal responsibilities of slaves and American

institutions in *My Bondage*. Without having the communal grounds to support the workings of individual liberties, it would be impossible for individuals to exercise their rights in a community that abuses its power and does not provide equal opportunities.

By expanding the story of his enslavement after publishing his *Narrative*, Douglass expresses his political shift and beliefs in how the slave should fight for their liberty. One way that he establishes this change is in his depiction of slaves in *My Bondage* compared to *Narrative*. Rather than portraying slaves in a way that calls for the sympathy of his readers, Douglass changed his depiction of slaves to demand the respect and acknowledgement of the communal strength of Black Americans. Archuleta points out this distinction by arguing that, in his *Narrative*, Douglass “lays claim to his identity as an individual with natural rights, attempts to gain sympathy for the plight of the subjugated slave, and invokes contempt and disgust for callous slaveholders who violate the humanity of both themselves and their chattels” (37). Douglass demands the recognition of individual rights for all people by emphasizing dignity and respect in *Narrative*. However, in *My Bondage*, he creates a contrast in tone by directly addressing the sympathy factor as a matter of public concern. For example, he recalls hearing the pleas of slaves who seemed to ask, ““*Oh! [W]hat’s the use?*”” whenever they would lift a hoe (34). Douglass expresses the desperate state that black slaves were in to prompt communal actions from outside forces, but he also understood that this was not the only sufficient means to do so. According to Marianne Noble, Douglass’ sympathetic tone in his childhood recollection such as in this instance implies that “such an attitude will fail to elicit anyone’s respect” (7). Therefore, as De Pietro notes, Douglass enforced a new tone in *My Bondage*, as he “proudly emphasizes both the rebellious camaraderie of his oppressed brothers and his own complicity in their defiance” (388). Noble points out another purpose in writing *My Bondage*, as it portrays

slaves differently to “insist that such lifelessness is the result of the brutalizing effects of slavery, not intrinsic to those whom life has defeated” (7). As a result of emphasizing the role that the American society had on the slaves’ well-being, Douglass shifts the attention away from the individual responsibilities of slaves to instead argue that America is “morally responsible for the institution of slavery,” and should therefore be looked at as “being in confederacy with the master and responsible for the so-called immorality of the slave population” (38). Edward J. Blum emphasizes this and the overarching effects slavery had on slaves, as he argues that slavery was a “legal status; it was an ideology; it was a psychological state; it was a religious (or irreligious) value; and it was a physical posture” (297). *My Bondage* therefore still calls for the recognition of individual rights, but Douglass also pushes for a communal response in holding American institutions accountable for the actions and ignorance of slaves rather than only emphasizing the importance of self-education and individual liberties.

Douglass’ new emphasis on a communal response to slavery indicates his changed approach to how he thinks the public should sympathize and view slaves, changing public undertones of pity and desperation for the slave to acknowledging the strength of the slave community. For instance, Douglass’ descriptions of his fight with Mr. Covey paints the actions of the slaves in a different light in both autobiographies. In *Narrative*, Douglass humbly attests that his fight with Mr. Covey was won due to his individual will to overcome slavery, and he makes little mention of other slaves’ actions during the fight. When Bill is called to the fight, his rejection to intervene indicates a more passive approach to his decision. Douglass only mentions that Bill refused to help Mr. Covey because he was hired “to work, and not to help to whip [Douglass],” leaving the scuffle to Douglass and thus ending his role in the fight (63). However, this passive action, which does not indicate a motive from Bill in his decision not to intervene, is

described differently in *My Bondage* to show a more active role. In *My Bondage*, Bill first “affected ignorance, and pretended he did not know what to do,” dubiously asking Mr. Covey, ““What shall I do, Mr. Covey”” (289). Following this, Bill indicates a moral duty in helping a fellow slave by directly refusing Mr. Covey’s orders to “Take hold of him” (289). Douglass still notes the same justification that Bill uses in *Narrative* to not intervene, but he further elaborates on Bill’s motivations for not intervening. Bill replies, “My GOD! Frederick, I ain't goin' to tech ye,” and walks away, leaving Douglass and Mr. Covey to settle the fight themselves (289). Rather than only mentioning his refusal to intervene because of what he was hired for, Douglass elaborates on Bill’s motives and morality in helping a fellow slave, by describing his decision as one intended to help him in the fight. As Archuleta states, by describing Bill’s actions with more intention to help a fellow slave than to simply reject helping Mr. Covey, Douglass “extends this instance of resistance more powerfully to the larger community of slaves and, by further extension, to the entire African American national community” (Archuleta 39).

Separated by a decade of political and ideological shifts, Douglass’ autobiographies represent his shifting political views on the issues of slavery and how it should be rectified. Upon writing *Narrative*, Douglass had a justified ideology that denied the country and its founding principles. With the influences of Garrison and many other abolitionists, Douglass was prepared to forever reject his citizenship and patriotism for the U.S. due to the horrors of slavery. However, upon leaving the U.S. and listening to voices that supported the founding documents of America, Douglass saw a new light in how to combat slavery through his public oratory and written works. Finally, after a decade of discovering new ways of viewing the U.S. and fighting slavery, Douglass retells his story as a slave in a new light in *My Bondage*. His revised autobiography not only rekindles the horrors of slavery and calls for the sympathy for slaves, but

it also demands the public eye to recognize the humanity and strength of slaves and African Americans in their communal commitment to fight slavery as U.S. citizens.

### CHAPTER III

#### “WHAT TO THE SLAVE IS THE FOURTH OF JULY?”: AMERICAN IN PRINCIPLE

By the early 1850s, Douglass' differing ideas about the U.S. began to parallel those defined in the Constitution and the Declaration of Independence. Separated nearly by a decade of political changes and a break from anti-Constitution voices, Douglass began to defend the principles embodied in the founding documents and insisted that these rights are entitled to African Americans as well. One of his first attempts to bring this new perspective to the public was in his speech, “What to the Slave is the Fourth of July?”, delivered in Rochester, New York. In his speech, Douglass shows his struggle between American identity and his race. To rectify the issue of not being seen as an American, Douglass emphasized patriotism and the American Revolution to define a patriotic American identity that is not determined by race. Douglass argues in his speech that African Americans are not only excluded from the pail of the glorious holiday, but they are also not included in the great American experiment, shut off from being recognized as American citizens. Douglass uses irony and chiasmus throughout his speech to point out his exclusion from America, stating, “This Fourth [of] July is *yours*, not *mine*. *You* may rejoice, *I* must mourn” (204). He insists he is entitled to American ideals, but he is nonetheless excluded from being recognized as an American because of his race. However, he declares that America's founding documents and revolutionary history are relevant to all people, including enslaved Americans who were not being recognized as human beings. In doing so, Douglass illuminated and critiqued the hypocrisy of American society for allowing its principles to be undermined, abused, and withheld from men on the basis of their race. Representing African Americans as human beings who are entitled to the rights and freedoms of the nation shines them in a different light compared how they were seen in *Narrative*. In doing so, Douglass criticizes

the U.S. for failing to live up to its ideals. He criticizes American institutions and churches for excluding and enslaving African Americans. Douglass' speech illuminates his struggle of identifying himself as an American while pointing out the hypocrisy of the U.S. in failing to live up to its ideals.

### **American Principles**

Although Douglass still had a critical opinion toward the U.S. during this time, he began to express a more optimistic tone about the country. Douglass establishes this optimistic change of tone in his speech by noting the young age of the country:

According to this fact, you are, even now, only in the beginning of your national career, still lingering in the period of childhood. I repeat, I am glad this is so. [...] Were the nation older, the patriot's heart might be sadder, and the reformer's brow heavier. Its future might be shrouded in gloom, and the hope of its prophets go out in sorrow. There is consolation in the thought that America is young. (196)

By pointing out the nation's youth, Douglass began to show his developing sense of hope for the country in demanding a better future for America. This hope, however, showed little optimism, nor was it obvious, as he continued to express his contention between his hope for the country and the hypocritical practices that denied his humanity.

Douglass presents his new nuanced approach in talking about the country by supporting the values written in the founding documents in his Fourth of July oration. Douglass had abandoned the Garrisonian position that the founding documents were corrupt, and that the Union must be dissolved to cut out all support of slavery. He shares his new perspective in the first part of his speech. He argues that while the institutions and hypocritical practices exclude him from being recognized as an American, he is entitled to the ideas embodied in the founding documents. He calls these ideas "eternal principles" and "great principles of justice and freedom" that "lay deep the corner-stone of the national superstructure, which has risen and still rises in

grandeur” (“What to the Slave?” 201). Recognizing these principles conveys Douglass’ changing political ideology, where he acknowledged the value of the Constitution and the Declaration of Independence as commendable documents. Moreover, he explains his new views on American politics by arguing that the founding documents should be used to combat slavery:

I will, in the name of humanity which is outraged, in the name of liberty which is fettered, in the name of the constitution and the Bible, which are disregarded and trampled upon, dare to call in question and to denounce, with all the emphasis I can command, everything that serves to perpetuate slavery—the great sin and shame of America! (205)

Douglass shows the utility of the Bible and the Constitution to argue that the country’s foundations should already recognize him as a human. He argues, “Would you have me argue that man is entitled to liberty? that he is the rightful owner of his own body? You have already declared it” (206). Douglass identifies the principles of the founding documents to emphasize the utility of maintaining these principles for the liberty and freedom of all individuals. Unlike his previous method in rejecting the country as his own, Douglass ultimately presents African Americans as citizens who should be accepted in the U.S.

Douglass continues to show his hopeful view of the country in his attempt to define American identity. He emphasizes the American Revolution as an integral characteristic of the country’s identity because he recognized the identities and views that many Americans upheld that aligned with the revolutionaries. However, articulating a national identity was not an easy task to take on, specifically in the realm of race. In America, race had become a determining factor of a national identity in the minds of the public. As Waldo E. Martin states, “An acute awareness of racial differences was a critical factor enabling architects of the emerging United States to develop a sense of their own separate racial (Anglo) and national (American) identities which they fused into a single identity—Anglo-American” (197). Douglass was conscious of his

white audience who had presumptions of how African Americans “ought” to act and speak. However, he used this to his advantage to undermine and subvert their biases about African Americans and a white national identity, as white men were his “only politically embodied readers, the only ones, that is, with a ‘vote’” (Wonham 192). Aware of this fact, Douglass highlighted his exclusion from the great American experiment to his advantage to criticize the U.S. from an outsider perspective.

Douglass’ first point of contention in defining American identity focuses on the idea of patriots fighting against their oppressors for their liberty. He argues that fighting oppression was not something that was being practiced by in large in their time. He drives this point forward by drawing a parallel between the American government with the British Crown as the oppressor, and the abolitionists with the American founders as the oppressed. Douglass first shows his recognition that the American public is proud of its founding and understands the relationship between the U.S. and the British Crown. He states, “To say *now* that America was right, and England wrong, is exceedingly easy. Everybody [...] can flippantly discant on the tyranny of England toward the American colonies” (198). He instructs his listeners that it is fashionable to say share this view. However, Douglass then argues that this message of America’s fight against the oppressive British Crown is actually “unfashionable in our day” (198). He calls for the audience to acknowledge the irony in their immediate fight between the abolitionists and the American government (198). Douglass states, “To side with the right, against the wrong, with the weak against the strong, and with the oppressed against the oppressor! *here* lies the merit, and the one which, of all others, seems unfashionable in our day. The cause of liberty may be stabbed by the men who glory in the deeds of your fathers” (198). Douglass indicates a sense of irony by citing the actions of the revolutionaries with the weak and oppressed, not with the strong. He

forces the audience to side with the abolitionists as the oppressed group who seeks to fight the oppressive group of institutionalized slavery (198). McClure states that this technique “serves to invite the audience into a position of supporting (or reaffirming) abolition in order to maintain their identification with the meaning of the principles of the occasion, provided that Douglass can persuade them that the turmoil associated with the institution of slavery is comparable to the situation of the Colonies in 1776” (434). Not only did Douglass work toward defining the American Revolution in his speech, but he sought to point out the hypocrisy in Americans who identified themselves with the revolutionaries.

The difficulty in defining American identity further extended to Douglass’ emphasis on the American Revolution, as he had initially struggled to determine the meaning of the war of independence (McClure 426). However, as Nicholas Buccola states, Douglass nevertheless had interpreted the American founding as a “liberal moment in human history,” and sought to “extend these liberal promises of the Founding to all people” (46). The importance of the Fourth of July celebration stemmed from the fact that it had already been canonized and had “achieved a status of civil religion in America” (qtd. in McClure 431). Howard H. Martin suggests that “it is no exaggeration to say that the Fourth of July was the most important national ceremonial during the last century. [...] The address climaxed an elaborate ritual dramatizing the annual rededication of the citizen to those national ideals proclaimed in the Declaration of Independence” (393). Moreover, he states that the celebration had become a “solemn, quasi-religious ceremonial” (394). Douglass seized upon the opportunity to redefine the meaning of the American Revolution during the Fourth of July celebration. In doing so, he would not only illuminate a new understanding of the nation’s revolutionary past and identity, but he would also depict a new definition of American identity to self-proclaimed patriots and revolutionaries.

However, Douglass argued that this identity was one that many Americans claimed to have but failed to truly uphold. He states:

Americans! your republican politics, not less than your republican religion, are flagrantly inconsistent. You boast of your love of liberty, your superior civilization, and your pure Christianity, while the whole political power of the nation, as embodied in the two great political parties, is solemnly pledged to support and perpetuate the enslavement of three millions of your countrymen. (216)

Douglass prompts his criticisms of the nation's religion and government by emphasizing the hypocrisy in how the nation's history was understood.

Douglass' identity of the revolutionaries differed from the public's. In particular, slaveholders held a different definition of American identity. While Douglass and slaveholders both had patriotic characterizations of America, they had different ways of defending their positions. The history of America, namely, the history of the nation's founding fathers, was viewed by slave owners as a justification for their practices. According to Krista Walter, slaveholders looked at the practice of slavery as a key aspect of being a true American (233). She claims that as they were political descendants of the revolutionaries of 1776 who practiced slavery, slave owners would argue that "they were merely carrying on a tradition and way of life sanctified by America's holiest historical documents. After all, the unassailable Founding Fathers had themselves been slaveholders" (233). Slaveholders would thus defend their practice of slavery by "aligning themselves with the nation's glorified past" (233). While slave owners used the history of the American Revolution to justify their practices of slavery, it was of great utility to the abolitionists. This presented a paradox in what defined an American in the traditional sense. Defining American identity not only revealed that the characterization of an American can differ from various groups of people, but it also showed that the nation's past can be interpreted in different ways. The same arguments of slaveholding used by slave owners posed a potential

threat to their practices. For instance, acknowledging and partaking in national pride was “a powerful weapon in the oratory of abolitionists, who drew heavily on the familiar phrases of Patrick Henry and Thomas Paine to generate a sense of outrage in loyal Americans” (Walter 234). Thus, just as they did so with the ideas of freedom, Southern planters cautioned one another on keeping slaves away from learning about the Fourth of July and other patriotic events in fear of insurrection by being “inspired by the defiant glory of the nation’s beginnings” (Walter 234). Furthermore, slaveholders feared that slaves would identify themselves as equals to “white men—that is, as equals to self- possessed individuals participating in a progressive, or even providential, national scheme” and that this would, in turn, prompt slaves to “participate in patriotic celebrations of ‘independence’ might expose to them the nation's profound contradiction” (234). Douglass, however, found great value in utilizing both characterizations of America. He used the same history, founders, and documents to come to a unique and hopeful conclusion of the nation’s principles and future. After all, Douglass had indicated a favorable opinion of the revolutionaries’ actions in the Fourth of July speech:

He who will, intelligently, lay down his life for his country, is a man whom it is not in human nature to despise. Your fathers staked their lives, their fortunes, and their sacred honor, on the cause of their country. In their admiration of liberty, they lost sight of all other interests. (201)

It is precisely the history of the nation that served as a tool for abolitionists and slaves to fight their oppressors. This indicated a paradox of nationalism, in which both abolitionists and slaveholders used the same historic revolutionary rhetoric to defend and persuade their positions on slavery. As abolitionists began to gain more influence by providing substantiated claims against slavery, slave owners objected to this as an “attack on free enterprise, and the American pursuit of ‘independence’ in general” (Walter 235). Not surprisingly, as Walter states, “Southern masters were often particularly interested in refusing slaves access to the history of the American

Revolution and the ideologies of liberation that fueled it” (234). Douglass extends his criticisms of slave owners America’s society and institutions for not sharing the founder’s actions with the slave community.

### **American Institutions**

Although Douglass shares his new perspective on the U.S. in his speech that conveys his insistence on his citizenship and acknowledgement of Constitutional principles, Douglass returns to his critical perspective of the country in discussing the politics, government, and institutions of America. Douglass makes his intentions for his speech clear, as he argues that through “scorching irony [...] the hypocrisy of the nation must be exposed; and its crimes against God and man must be proclaimed and denounced” (207). Douglass first highlights his displacement of himself and other black Americans away from the celebration, unable to identify with the U.S. and celebrate its founding. He states, “I say it with a sad sense of disparity between us. I am not included within the pale of this glorious anniversary! Your high independence only reveals the immeasurable distance between us” (204). Rather than outright rejecting the country, Douglass argues that he is simply not accepted in it, and therefore cannot accept it as his own. Douglass maintains his displacement when he explains that U.S. institutions are not his, as they practice or enable slavery. The institutions he mentions represent the foundation of the country’s government establishments:

The causes which led to the separation of the colonies from the British crown have never lacked for a tongue. They have all been taught in your common schools, narrated at your firesides, unfolded from your pulpits, and thundered from your legislative halls, and are as familiar to you as household words. They form the staple of your national poetry and eloquence. (202)

Douglass explains his criticisms of American institutions through his emphasis on the Fugitive Slave Act of 1850 that reestablished slavery as a national institution and was practiced by the

entire nation. Douglass argues that there is no longer a distinction between New York and Virginia, as New York had effectively been enabled to continue the practice of slavery under the Fugitive Slave Act. Douglass states that the institution of slavery is “the power to hold, hunt, and sell men, women and children, as slaves,” which is no longer a “mere state institution, but is now an institution of the whole United States” (211). With slavery defined as a national institution of the U.S., Douglass juxtaposes the country’s patriotic themes with the decadence of slavery, stating that “The power [of slavery] is co-extensive with the star-spangled banner, and American Christianity. Where these go, may also go the merciless slave-hunter. Where these are, man is not sacred [...] By that most foul and fiendish of all human decrees, the liberty and person of every man are put in peril” (211). Douglass effectively articulates a paradox for the listening audience. On the one hand, slavery is continually endorsed by the law and enforced by the public, and it has risen in the ranks of American institutions by establishing itself as a defining institution for the entire nation. On the other hand, the principles of the founding documents fall short in comparison to the growing strength of slavery, as they are ultimately misused and deemed futile by the American institutions that ignore these values.

Not only are American institutions criticized, but Douglass also aims at the participants of the institutions that enable the practice of slavery. He states that “law-makers have commanded all good citizens to engage in this hellish sport. Your President, your Secretary of States, your *lords*, *nobles*, and ecclesiastics, enforce, as a duty you owe to your free and glorious country, and to your God, that you do this accursed thing” (211). By focusing on the institutions and the participants in U.S. establishments, Douglass expresses his initial argument that the practice of slavery has overshadowed the patriotic values espoused by the American public. He states that “The right of the hunter to his prey stands superior to the right of marriage, and to all

rights in this republic, the rights of God included! For black men there are neither law, justice, humanity, not religion. The Fugitive Slave *Law* makes mercy to them a crime; and bribes the judge who tries them” (211). Douglass rearticulates his final point of emphasizing the hypocrisy of American institutions by demanding that the world should recognize the U.S. as a country that undermines its principles:

Let it be thundered around the world, that, in tyrant-killing, king-hating, people-loving, democratic, Christian America, the seats of justice are filled with judges, who hold their offices under an open and palpable bribe, and are bound, in deciding in the case of a man’s liberty, hear only his accusers! (212)

Douglass shows that the U.S. rejects him by its practices, and the country should therefore be defined by its wickedness.

Following his declaration that the nation is guilty of the bloodshed caused by slavery, Douglass furthers his argument against American institutions to discuss the hypocrisy of Christian churches. Douglass argues that if the churches and ministers were “not stupidly blind, or most wickedly indifferent,” they would also regard the Fugitive Slave Law as “one of the grossest infringements of Christian Liberty” (212). Douglass looks back to his earlier implications of reflecting the U.S. with the British to draw a comparison between the ministers who allow slavery to continue and the hypocrites described in the Bible. Douglass points out the abuse of Christianity with ministers he refers to as the “Divines” (213). Douglass argues that they “convert the very name of religion into an engine of tyranny, and barbarous cruelty, and serve to confirm more infidels,” while making religion a “cold and flinty-hearted thing, having neither principles of right action, nor bowels of compassion” (215). Douglass criticizes those who pervert religious liberties by stating that they “strip the love of God of its beauty, and leave the throng of religion a huge, horrible, repulsive form. It is a religion for oppressors, tyrants, man-stealers, and thugs” (215). Douglass shows that American churches do not live up to their

own standards. He says, “At the very moment that they are thanking God for the enjoyment of civil and religious liberty [...] they are utterly silent in respect to a law which robs religion of its chief significance, and makes it utterly worthless to a world lying in wickedness” (212).

Douglass implies that the churches that do not recognize the Fugitive Slave Law as a devastating issue are wicked. He argues that the religion espoused within these churches is also devoid of righteousness. He states, “The fact that the church of our country, (with fractional exceptions), does not esteem ‘the Fugitive Slave Law’ as a declaration of war against religious liberty, implies that that church regards religion simply as a form of worship, an empty ceremony, and not a vital principle, requiring active benevolence, justice, love and good will towards man” (213). Although Douglass argues against wicked and empty churches, he also expresses a recognition that there are exceptions to this characterization of hypocritical churches. Douglass’ justification for Christianity reflects the point that he made in the Appendix for *Narrative*; the principles and values indicated in the Bible are not inherently evil. Rather, it is the fault of those who misuse or undermine the values that make it “evil.” Douglass’ acknowledgement of the few exceptions of American churches expresses his will to recognize other institutions that do not fall short to the practice of slavery.

### **The Declaration of Independence**

By the time he delivered his speech, Douglass had developed a deep understanding of and appreciation for the Declaration of Independence. He emphasizes the importance of liberty in his 1850 address, “An Antislavery Tocsin,” delivered in Rochester, New York. In his speech, he argues that liberty “existed in the very idea of man’s creation,” and that man was “created in it, endowed with it, and [...] can never be taken from him” (“An Antislavery Tocsin” 1850). Douglass’ emphasis upon liberty aligned with the Declaration’s main purpose of ensuring the

rights to life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness. According to the document, individuals are thought to be “endowed by their Creator, with certain unalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness” (U.S. 1776). Douglass’ view of the Declaration found itself in his Fourth of July speech. He indicates a common appreciation and defense for the founding documents, as he uses the Declaration of Independence in his speech as a manifesto that exposes the hypocrisy in American society with its practices of slavery. By doing so, Douglass expresses his commitment to individual rights and states that “The 4th of July is the first great fact in [the] nation’s history—the very ring-bolt in the chain of [the] yet undeveloped destiny” (“What to the Slave?” 199). Douglass combines his appreciation of the Declaration with America’s youth to show that the country has the framework to actualize its principles.

Taking inspiration from the rhetoric shown in the Declaration of Independence, Douglass utilizes the notion of unalienable rights to formulate formidable and consistent arguments against slavery in his speech. As McClure states, “in stark contrast with Garrison, Douglass affirms the principles of the Declaration of Independence and the history of the founding of the Republic, while simultaneously subverting the hypocrisy of the celebration in light of slavery” (433). Douglass thus commends the decision to write the Declaration as a “good resolution” for the freedom of all citizens (“What to the Slave?” 199). He acknowledges the pride and patriotism of citizens who celebrated the formation of the document, as he attests that “contained in that instrument are saving principles” (200). Consequently, describing the Declaration of Independence in a positive light initiated a discourse that established it as a fundamental document for the nation that holds eternal principles. Thus, as McClure states, the Fourth of July speech was an “early public attempt” for Douglass to present new “argumentative strategies and persuasive resources afforded by his new position” (426). His most prevailing strategy in

utilizing his new perspective of the Declaration was his emphasis on individual rights. Douglass thus had “adopted a new rhetorical strategy on the ideals associated with the occasion of the Fourth of July as it relates to the abolitionist cause,” and was beginning to develop “a new line of argument that simultaneously affirms the values of the Declaration while condemning the hypocrisy of the celebration” (McClure 433).

To further articulate his definition of American identity by pointing out the hypocrisies practiced by the public, Douglass centers his speech on the principles found in the Declaration, recognizing liberty, justice, and freedom as established national principles. Douglass asks, “Are the great principles of political freedom and of natural justice, embodied in that Declaration of Independence, extended to us?” (203). Douglass then states that these principles of justice and freedom are the “corner-stone of the national superstructure” that form the “staple of your national poetry and eloquence” (201-202). As Buccola explains, “With the philosophy of the Declaration as his foundation, Douglass embraced the traditional liberal triad of rights to life, liberty, and property as well as the related right to pursue happiness” (47). By affirming the importance and value of the Declaration, Douglass bridges the differences between himself and his audience. However, he then interrogates the audience by asking whether these principles are experienced to slaves and why he was called to speak on that day. Rather than providing an answer to this inquiry, Douglass brings the focus back to the Declaration’s principles and the experiences—or lack thereof—of these principles by slaves:

Are the great principles of political freedom and of natural justice, embodied in that Declaration of Independence, extended to us? Am I, therefore, called upon to bring our humble offering to the national altar, and to confess the benefits and express devout gratitude for the blessings resulting from your independence to us? (203)

Douglass then explains that he in fact cannot answer whether the principles of the founding documents are extended to him and people like him. He asserts his boldest claim in his speech that brings his understanding and irony of the celebration in tandem, bringing his message to full fruition:

I am not included within the pale of this glorious anniversary! Your high independence only reveals the immeasurable distance between us. The blessings in which you, this day, rejoice, are not enjoyed in common.—The rich inheritance of justice, liberty, prosperity and independence, bequeathed by your fathers, is shared by you, not by me. The sunlight that brought life and healing to you, has brought stripes and death to me. This Fourth [of] July is yours, not mine. *You* may rejoice, *I* must mourn. (204)

This statement, perhaps one of his most notable declarations in all of his orations, illuminates the essence of Douglass' stance on the celebration and encapsulates the state of the U.S. Following this, he finally presents his definitive response to the question indicated in the name of the speech. However, rather than discussing the U.S. and its celebration in a positive light, Douglass brings forth the hypocrisy and devastation of the practice of slavery in a nation that promises the rights of all citizens:

What, to the American slave, is your 4th of July? I answer: a day that reveals to him, more than all other days in the year, the gross injustice and cruelty to which he is the constant victim. To him, your celebration is a sham; your boasted liberty, an unholy license; your national greatness, swelling vanity; your sounds of rejoicing are empty and heartless; your denunciations of tyrants, brass fronted impudence; your shouts of liberty and equality, hollow mockery; your prayers and hymns, your sermons and thanksgivings, with all your religious parade, and solemnity, are, to him, mere bombast, fraud, deception, impiety, and hypocrisy. (204)

With a strong sense of hypocrisy indicated in this declaration, Douglass presents a conundrum that not only negates the public's sense of pride in their celebration but also indicates the issues that contradict his definitions of American identity and founding principles:

You declare, before the world, and are understood by the world to declare, that you 'hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal; and are

endowed by their Creator with certain inalienable rights; and that, among these are, life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness;’ and yet, you hold securely, in a bondage which, according to your own Thomas Jefferson, ‘is worse than ages of that which your fathers rose in rebellion to oppose,’ a seventh part of the inhabitants of your country. (217)

Douglass therefore does not fall in line with those abolitionists who sought to overthrow the nation’s founding documents and integral institutions, nor the self-proclaimed patriots who did not live up to their esteemed identity of being revolutionaries for liberty. Instead, Douglass casts himself away from the celebration and positions himself as an objective observer of the U.S., as he indicates the futility of celebrating a founding document that fails to be upheld by the society.

### **The Constitution**

Douglass’ opinions about the Constitution had evolved substantially from his *Narrative* to his Fourth of July oration. In his speech, Douglass presents his pro-Constitutional position and denounces those who believe that the document is pro-slavery. Douglass first reaffirms the beliefs of the public by coming to a compromised position in discussing his perspective of the celebration and the founding documents as he had done thus far in his speech. He states that slavery is “in fact, guaranteed and sanctioned by the Constitution of the United States; that, the right to hold, and to hunt slaves is a part of that Constitution framed by the illustrious Fathers of this Republic” (218). Douglass refutes this claim by suggesting that if it were true, he would condemn the writers of the Constitution for stooping so low as to instill pro-slavery sentiments in the document (218). Rather than sharing the same pro-slavery conclusion that many abolitionists held at the time about the Constitution, Douglass proposes a new reading of the document in his speech. He states, “I differ from those who charge this baseness on the framers of the Constitution of the United States. *It is a slander upon their memory*, at least, so I believe” (218). While Douglass argues that he has a different reading of the document, he suggests that he does

not have the time nor the ability to address the constitutional question nor to address the topic at length (218). However, immediately after suggesting that he could not, Douglass explains and justifies his anti-slavery interpretation, using the argument of what is directly written in the Constitution as well as his original-intent reading of it. Knowing the framed perceptions of pro-slavery sentiments in the Constitution, which allowed the Fugitive Slave Law to be passed in the North, Douglass wasted no time in arguing that “the Constitution is a GLORIOUS LIBERTY DOCUMENT” when it is interpreted as it “*ought to be*” (219).

The view that the Constitution is an anti-slavery document came from Douglass’s inquisition of reading it with original intent. As Wilson J. Moses states, Douglass introducing the subject of original intent had “tacitly addressed the problem of sociological jurisprudence,” as original intent “opens up the question of what the words of the Constitution were understood to mean by the framers of the Constitution, by the state ratifying conventions, and by diverse factions among the people at large” (74). Douglass’ emphasis on original intent allowed him to argue against the pro-slavery reading of the Constitution, as he asks the audience, “if the Constitution were intended to be, by its framers and adopters, a slaveholding instrument, why neither *slavery*, *slaveholding*, nor *slave* can anywhere be found in it” (“What to the Slave?” 219). He develops his anti-slavery reading further by arguing that the rules of interpreting the document are pragmatic, in that they can be and should be interpretable by any common citizen. Douglass introduces the argument made by Ex-Vice President George M. Dallas to articulate this point. He refers to Dallas’ perspective that the Constitution is “an object to which no American mind can be too attentive, and no American heart too devoted,” to find a new interpretation of it (219). Rather than having intellectuals interpret the Constitution as a pro-slavery document, Dallas and Douglass argue that the document is “plain and intelligible,” and is “meant for [the]

home-bred, unsophisticated understandings of our fellow-citizens” (219). Thus, according to Douglass, the Constitution is meant to be read and understood by common citizens, and it is not a pro-slavery document when it is interpreted only from what is written.

Douglass’ speech presents a reversal in his shifting political views that were portrayed in his two autobiographies. Rather than changing from a negative perspective on America to a patriotic one, Douglass’ speech begins with a positive acknowledgement of America’s founding principles and shifts to a negative one that criticizes the country’s hypocrisies and cruelties. However, rather than rejecting the country as he did in his *Narrative*, Douglass maintains hope for America and stands by its principles despite not being recognized as a free citizen of the country:

Allow me to say, in conclusion, notwithstanding the dark picture I have this day presented, of the state of the nation. I do not despair of this country. There are forces in operation, which must inevitably, work the downfall of slavery. [...] I, therefore, leave off where I began, with *hope*. While drawing encouragement from ‘the Declaration of Independence,’ the great principles it contains, and the genius of American Institutions, my spirit is also cheered by the obvious tendencies of the age. (220)

Despite his political and personal indignations about the U.S. and its founding history, Douglass comes to a positive and hopeful conclusion about America. He declares that the country fails to acknowledge his humanity in his speech, but that does not stop him from acknowledging its potential to change.

Although Douglass had maintained a negative skepticism about the country due to his personal circumstances and beliefs, he nonetheless acknowledged the value of the Fourth of July celebration. This not only allowed Douglass to showcase his new position on the Constitution and the country at large to other abolitionists after leaving his previous anti-Constitution perspective, but his unique rhetoric had given him a new approach in fighting slavery and in

defining American identity (McClure 426). While he understood that many founders in the revolutionary past had defended and practiced slavery, Douglass commended their actions in fighting for their liberty against the oppressive British Crown. Upon doing so, he emphasized the revolutionary identity that many citizens aspired to uphold and maintain as their national identity. With this, Douglass was able to orient himself in a favorable political position with his audience. However, he ultimately did not present a one-dimensional approach to the celebration and the patriotic sentiments for the country. By utilizing irony and asking leading questions, Douglass removed himself from the celebration and brought to focus the hypocrisy of the U.S., its institutions, and its principles. While he attested that there are a few institutions that do not practice or permit slavery, Douglass insisted that the mere fact that slavery still existed in the nation meant that all powers and American establishments were to blame for the burden of slavery. Furthermore, despite expressing Christian sentiments in his speech, he did not exclude churches from the blame, emphasizing the role in which all people have in allowing slavery to persist. However, with all of his criticisms and the arguments that justify such criticisms, Douglass did not sit comfortably with his anti-Constitution perspective as he had done so in previous years following his escape from slavery. Instead, Douglass utilized the principles of the Constitution and the Declaration of Independence to argue that slavery cannot be supported in the founding documents. Ultimately, by the end of his speech, while he illuminated the hypocrisy of American society for glorifying their revolutionary past while practicing slavery, Douglass defined the U.S. in a way that prompted the audience to question their understanding and support of American principles, institutions, and identities.

## CHAPTER IV

### CONCLUSION: DOUGLASS' HEROISM IN *THE HEROIC SLAVE*

Upon delivering his Fourth of July speech, Douglass continued to contend with his identity as a black man with the American identity that he sought to define. By emphasizing the revolutionary past to illustrate a national identity in his speech, Douglass identified Americans with patriotic and revolutionary themes; however, he was still not accepted as an American citizen. This was particularly the case for Douglass in being seen as an embodiment of American identity, as his race had “effectively excluded him from it,” since African Americans were “almost universally regarded as culturally inferior, and a black orator would far sooner be judged an oddity than a leader” (Foner and Taylor xii). Nonetheless, to Douglass, fighting for one’s own liberty became a fundamental principle of American identity regardless of race, and he realized that this principle posed a potential threat to slaveholders. Douglass aimed to subvert the American public’s expectations of the nation’s identity by diverging race away from the principles written in the founding documents. This subversion is displayed in his novella, *The Heroic Slave*, through the actions of Madison Washington, who portrays the founding principles that Douglass emphasized in his Fourth of July speech as universal principles that are not tied to race. *The Heroic Slave* therefore undermines the emphasis on race that the American public utilized to establish a white national identity, as it portrays Madison as a character who is not identified by his race but by his actions. While this novella was based on the real *Creole* slave revolt of 1841 that Madison Washington himself conducted, *The Heroic Slave* represents a culmination of Douglass’ political transformations that are depicted in his autobiographies as well as his characterizations of American identity that he defines in his Fourth of July speech.

Following the order of my analyses in the previous chapters, Douglass' understanding and insistence upon liberty is shown in the first part of novella. Madison describes his escape from slavery to Mr. Listwell in a manner that reflects the ideological changes that Douglass underwent during the decade between *Narrative* and *My Bondage*. This is shown by Madison's attitude of how slaves should react to slavery before the time skip in the story. As *Narrative* suggests a more independent fight against slavery, Madison's narration of his escape from slavery also suggests this approach, as he displaces himself from other slaves who show an apparent complacency for their circumstances:

I saw my fellow-slaves seated by a warm fire, merrily passing away the time, as though their hearts knew no sorrow. Although I envied their seeming contentment, all wretched as I was, I despised the cowardly acquiescence in their own degradation which it implied, and felt a kind of pride and glory in my own desperate lot. I dared not enter the quarters,—for where there is seeming contentment with slavery, there is certain treachery to freedom. (163)

Rather than joining the slaves in their quarters, Madison proceeds to his master's lot instead with a different approach to their conditions as slaves. Madison's disposition away from the slaves reflects Douglass' initial independent approach in fighting slavery. This is further portrayed with how Madison regards the country at large, conveying a similar opinion to Douglass' Garrisonian perspective that rejected the utility of the American society and institutions to assist in the fight against slavery:

I felt myself robbed by society of all my just rights; that I was in an enemy's land, who sought both my life and my liberty. They had transformed me into a brute; made merchandise of my body, and, for all the purposes of my flight, turned day into night,—and guided by my own necessities, and in contempt of their conventionalities, I did not scruple to take bread where I could get it. (165-166)

Madison expresses a critical point of view that rejects America. He claims that the country is not his, just as Douglass had done so before his political views changed. However, a change in the story's presentation of the country is made apparent when Mr. Listwell describes his

acknowledgement of Madison's indignations of the country in a similar light to the way Douglass' perspective of the country had changed. He states, "I once had doubts on this point myself, but a conversation with Gerrit Smith, (a man, by the way, that I wish you could see, for he is a devoted friend of your race, and I know he would receive you gladly,) put an end to all my doubts on this point" (166). Listwell's allusion to Gerrit Smith reflects the start of Douglass' political transformation, as the influences of Smith and other pro-Constitution abolitionist inspired Douglass' political metamorphosis and his eventual anti-slavery reading of the Constitution (McClure 426).

Just as Douglass maintained his Christian faith despite its American counterparts, Madison's acknowledgement of a praying slave's faith is one instance where Christianity is portrayed as a universal practice. For example, a begging slave pleads to God for his freedom due to his circumstances. He states, "take pity on poor me! O deliver me! O deliver me! in mercy, O God, deliver me from the chains and manifold hardships of slavery! With thee, O Father, all things are possible" (167). After Madison hears the praying slave, he addresses God as "the wise, all-good, and the common Father of all mankind" (167). The slave's plea for help not only demonstrates that enslaved Americans shared similar practices and beliefs as white Americans, but it also portrays Christianity as another American value that is tied to no race.

Douglass knew that most of his readers were white, so he created a story that implicated and reaffirmed some of their patriotic expectations. As Walter states, "The Heroic Slave tries to affirm the Northern white audience's tenuous faith in the 'collective solidarity' of the American project and to redirect misguided patriotic values toward unconditional and immediate abolition—the fulfillment of the nation's true destiny. Ideally, the reader should reject slavery because it is first and foremost anti-American" (237). Just as Douglass had done so in his Fourth

of July speech, *The Heroic Slave* presents a patriotic position that accommodates for his audience. However, rather than shifting to a critical tone, as Douglass had done in “What to the Slave” to address the hypocrisy of American democracy, *The Heroic Slave* suggests that American identity, along with the country at large, belongs to those who fight for liberty. For example, Madison’s revolt in the *Creole* ship circumvents the cause of the American Revolution from being an ideal tied to race to being an American ideal intertwined with no race.

As Douglass depicted the fight for liberty in *Narrative* with his fight with Mr. Covey, he expresses this in Madison’s fight with Tom in *The Heroic Slave*. The fight between Madison and Tom portrays a parallel of black slaves owning and enacting the ideals of the American revolutionaries that insists on the impartiality of Americanness. It depicts a tension in the novella that expresses a racial bias against the actions done by black slaves when compared to the nation’s founders. Madison points out this hypocrisy to Tom, who calls Madison a “murderous villain” after the slave revolt (190). Madison argues against this hypocrisy, similar to the way that Douglass depicts this in his Fourth of July speech:

You call me a *black murderer*. I am not a murderer. God is my witness that LIBERTY, not *malice*, is the motive for this night’s work. [...] We have struck for our freedom, and if a true man’s heart be in you, you will honor us for the deed. We have done that which you applaud your fathers for doing, and if we are murderers, *so were they*. (190)

Madison’s declaration creates a tension in recognizing American identity, as he upholds the principles of the American founders and makes himself to be a patriot who is “raceless.” Tom notes this raceless American character, as he “forgot his blackness in the dignity of his manner, and the eloquence of his speech” (190). Tom also admits that he was wrong to call him a murderer. He states:

I confess, gentlemen, I felt myself in the presence of a superior man; one who, had he been a white man, I would have followed willingly and gladly in any

honorable enterprise. Our difference of color was the only ground for difference of action. It was not that his principles were wrong in the abstract; for they are the principles of 1776. But I could not bring myself to recognize their application to one whom I deemed my inferior. (192)

Madison therefore establishes himself as a prominent patriot not by his blackness or his nationality, but by his actions that reflect the nation's virtue of freedom. Through *The Heroic Slave*, Douglass presents American identity as a universal identity, which creates a narrative that undermines the expectations of white readers who associated race with their national identity. Through this examination of Madison as an American hero, Douglass' *The Heroic Slave* dismantles the presumption that American identity is tied to race. Instead, it draws a parallel of American slaves with the American revolutionaries to demonstrate that American values are universal.

With the research that has been conducted on Douglass' works and his ideological changes, the way that he can be read in modern settings is not emphasized in the scholarship. Many scholars discuss the impact that Douglass had in the abolitionist movement and the turn in American politics, but there lacks a discussion about his impact and relevance in today's political and cultural spheres. Since the crux of my research aims to identify the definitions and values of America that transcend race and generations, it would be vital for me to find sources that examine him as a timeless political orator, more than what I have found in my research thus far. I have, however, found a few sources that explain Douglass' growing influences in contemporary politics. Authors like John R. McKivigan and Heather L. Kaufman emphasize this point, as they argue that Douglass "stood for what was best in American ideals." Moreover, they point out that he pushed for "an extended definition of citizenship, liberty, and opportunity that would abolish past racial and general discrimination and fulfill the original promise of the American Revolution" (xvii-xviii). This indicates that Douglass had, in many ways, eventually reiterated

the values of the American Revolution that he had first struggled to understand. Edward J. Blum reinforces McKivigan and Kaufman's assessment as well, as he states that "editors John R. McKivigan and Heather L. Kaufman view 'liberty' as a defining feature of Douglass's work" (297). While McKivigan and Kaufman do not directly discuss the various ways that Douglass can be read in modern contexts, they nonetheless emphasize how Douglass restored the meanings of liberty and American citizenship in a way that future generations have come to understand them. Finally, another notable author who highlights Douglass' strong influence in today's politics, or the growing potential to be further studied, is Nicholas Buccola, who discusses the current influences that Douglass has in politics today. He states that "in recent political discussions Douglass's name was invoked by prominent members of both the Republican and Democratic parties," and that the "explicit or implicit suggestion that Douglass is 'on our side' in a contemporary philosophical or policy debate may carry some significance for political elites and citizens" (11). However, the scholarship on Douglass, as well as the partisan use of his legacy, should continue to emphasize his relevance in American society for future generations.

Ultimately, presenting Douglass' philosophy of holding a true and cogent American identity illuminates a unique approach to the way communities in America can identify themselves. The American identity portrayed in Douglass' works does not negate individual qualities and values of all people; it does not create a social binding in which the individual's identity is lost. Rather, Douglass' approach to American identity prompts a common ideal to strive for, where all people are judged and treated equally with the virtue of fighting for liberty. Douglass' decision to accept the U.S. as his own country, and his identification as an American, speaks volumes to what it means to be an American. The defining characteristics of what

“America” and “American” means is in full display in his writings and orations. Despite his life-threatening, demoralizing, and perilous experiences as a slave, Douglass was somehow able to appreciate the values of the country and define an American identity. Rather than allowing his life to be judged and determined by white slave owners, Douglass established himself in a slave-owning country as a free black man who defended the principles of the nation’s founding documents. *The North Star*’s running motto embodies Douglass’ legacy as an answer to the universal emancipation of all people: “Right is of no sex—Truth is of no color—God is the Father of us all, and we are brethren.”

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