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Slavery and Oratory: Frederick Douglass in the History of Rhetoric

ROB GOODMAN *Toronto Metropolitan University, Canada*

The antislavery and antiracist oratory of Frederick Douglass is a powerful case study of the appropriation and transformation of "the master's tools." Douglass's formative exposure to the classical rhetorical tradition is well known—but just as important are the ways in which he subverted it. He did so by developing a categorically new, hybrid role: the orator-slave. *Slavery played an important part in the conceptual apparatus of the Ciceronian rhetoric that Douglass absorbed: it conceived of oratory as a willing, temporary submission to the harms that were commonly associated with slavery. An explanation of the force of Douglass's oratory should begin with his translation of the orator-slave identification from the metaphorical to the literal plane. Drawing on Douglass's self-education in rhetorical discipline and artifice, an account of the symbolic uses of slavery in classical rhetoric, and Douglass's own oratory, I reconstruct his claim to embody classical rhetoric in a uniquely vivid way.*

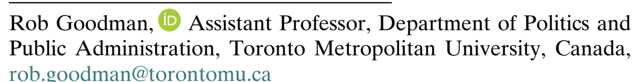
INTRODUCTION

What are the implications of critiquing oppression with the language, or cultural models, or conceptual tools of the oppressor? One view—as expressed in Lorde's ([1984] 2007) well-known aphorism that "the master's tools will never dismantle the master's house"—is that such efforts are doomed to failure. Another view, which we might call the view from the master's house, celebrates these efforts for the way they balance such debits as slavery and colonialism in the moral ledger. This "familiar self-consoling notion" (Gopal 2019, 437) might claim "that anticolonial resistance was born of an education in British liberty" or make special note of the cases "in which the slave denounces slavery in the master's language" (Getachew 2020). Both lines of argument, however, share the assumption that the master's tools remain the master's in an important sense, even when they are turned to purposes of resistance.

A contrasting perspective—and, I think, a more generative one—comes from recent scholarship on *creolization.* This view stresses the processes of hybridization or "illicit blendings" (Bernabé, Chamoiseau, and Confiant 1990) that occur when old concepts are taken up in new contexts, even when those contexts are defined by deep inequality, colonialism, or enslavement. Creolization has come to "refer to a discourse concerning mixture, identity, and the concomitant intersecting processes of language, culture, religion, race, indigenization, and the political" (Roberts 2015, 145), or to "distinctive ways in which opposed, unequal groups forged mutually instantiating practices in contexts of radical historical rupture" (Gordon 2014, 2–3; see also Cohen and Toninato 2009; Gordon 2014, 2, 3; Lionnet and Shih 2011). An important insight of this scholarship is that "the master's tools" are not static, and that taking them up in contexts of rupture or oppression can fundamentally transform them.

One of the most consequential instances of this kind of creolizing transformation took place at the intersection of classical rhetoric and American slavery, as exemplified in the oratorical career of Frederick Douglass. As I argue in this article, a hallmark of that career was Douglass's development of a categorically new social role: the *orator-slave.* Though Douglass was not the first fugitive from slavery to win recognition as an abolitionist speaker in America, he was by far the best known, and his oratory and autobiographical writing bear witness to a surprising set of continuities between the social roles of orator and slave. Douglass drew on these continuities in order to elaborate the hybrid role of orator-slave. By examining that process of hybridization, we can better understand the conceptual role that slavery played in the tradition of rhetoric inherited by Douglass; we can begin to grasp the ways that Douglass appropriated, transformed, and subverted classical rhetoric; and we can reassess the persistent yet mistaken portrayal of Douglass as a passive recipient of the classical tradition.

For a number of Douglass's contemporaries, the idea of an orator-slave was more than a radical innovation—it was literally impossible. Particularly at the outset of his public career, these contemporaries insisted that Douglass's stories of enslavement must have been fabricated, on the grounds that they could not possibly be consistent with his demonstrated eloquence on the platform (Foner 1950, 59). Their disbelief was no doubt informed by racist assumptions about the sort of person who could, and could not, qualify as eloquent. But at the same time, it also seems intuitive to imagine that, in their long coexistence as roles at opposite social poles, the orator represented everything that the slave was not, and vice-versa. Slavery was "social death" (Patterson 1982); oratory was the height of social


Rob Goodman, Assistant Professor, Department of Politics and Public Administration, Toronto Metropolitan University, Canada, rob.goodman@torontomu.ca

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visibility and honor. The slave was politically invisible; the orator, for Cicero, was the model of the "ideal citizen" (Connolly 2007, 1). The slave was subject to "excommunication" from the social order (Patterson 1982, 5); the orator claimed the power to remake it. In defining himself as both an orator and a fugitive from slavery (one who was legally enslaved well into his public career, and who continued to identify with the enslaved after his own manumission), in announcing an oratorical vocation to speak on behalf of those who were forcibly silenced by the slave system (Douglass [1850] 2014, 360), and in claiming to speak "in fetters" (Douglass [1852] 2018, 68), Douglass made the seemingly paradoxical claim that he occupied both diametrically opposed social positions at once.

But that claim appears less paradoxical in light of the interplay between slavery and oratory in the rhetorical tradition that Douglass absorbed. That tradition originated, of course, in the slave societies (Finley 1980) of Greece and Rome. Classical oratory did not simply coexist with slavery: slavery was an important part of its conceptual apparatus. Especially in the Ciceronian tradition, which had a profound influence on Douglass, the figure of the slave contributed to an account of what oratory was and why it was so praiseworthy. That tradition valorized oratory as an enticingly dangerous activity, an opportunity for the orator to demonstrate *virtus* by voluntarily risking harm in the public eye (Goodman 2022, 13). As I show in this article, the Ciceronian tradition conceived of oratory as a willing and temporary submission to the very harms that were commonly associated with slavery.

In this view, oratory was a symbolic drama of domination and escape: in subjecting himself to the arbitrary power of the audience, the elite male orator symbolically risked his status, taking on attributes he and his audience associated with the lowest of the low; with a successful performance, he won his status back. Occasionally, the identification of the orator and the slave was made explicit, as when Cicero recorded a predecessor promising the public that he and his colleagues "both can and should be [your] slaves" (Cicero 2001, 1.225; see Dugan 2005, 143–4; Fantham 2004, 220). More often, though, the identification of slavery and oratory was a matter of correspondence, a shared conceptual vocabulary for describing the purported harms of each. In this article, I offer evidence for three such "parallel harms" in Roman thought. First is the subjection to physical discipline under the gaze of an audience; second is the subjection to arbitrary judgment; and third is the felt need to cultivate "defensive empathy," or anticipatory attention to the moods of the arbitrary judge.

Even if it strikingly captured the high stakes of public performance in the eyes of the classical elite, the idea that enslavement and oratory imposed morally comparable harms surely strains credulity: invocations of the harms of slavery from elites who themselves enslaved others can only be seen as hyperbolic exaggerations, metaphors that touched only obliquely on the actual condition of the enslaved. So an explanation of the force of Douglass's oratory—in a world in which the Ciceronian tradition was still regarded as canonical—ought to begin with the way in which he translated the identification of orator and slave from the metaphorical to the literal plane: that is, with the way in which he defined his oratory as uniquely risky and therefore uniquely courageous, given his identification with the enslaved and his position on the racial margins. If Douglass was an imitator of Cicero (at a time when Black imitation of culture deemed white was especially fraught; Wilson 2003, 89), he was far from an uncritical imitator (see Hawley 2022). Rather, he was an example of the process by which "imitation [acts] as a prime cause of the evolution of oratory"—a process, ironically enough, theorized by Cicero himself (Fantham 1978, 2).

Douglass's point of contact with Ciceronian rhetoric was *The Columbian Orator*, the most popular rhetoric textbook of his day. In 1830, as an enslaved 12 year old in Baltimore, he scraped together 50 cents to purchase a used copy. Eight years later, when he escaped slavery and entered into a new life, *The Columbian Orator* was one of the few items in his possession. In his autobiographies, Douglass (1857, 157–8; 1882, 194; [1845] 2009, 49) would describe it as "a rich treasure," "a gem of a book" that he took to with "fanaticism" and reread at "every opportunity I got." Its collection of speeches—first assembled by the Boston educator Caleb Bingham in 1797—introduced Douglass to his vocation. Above all, Bingham's introduction to the volume, "General Directions for Speaking," largely adapted from Cicero, became Douglass's only remotely formal training in the practice and techniques of public address. That introduction was, in the judgment of biographer Blight (2018, 46) "the most important thing Douglass ever read." As I argue in this article, Douglass did not merely assimilate himself into the classical tradition that he encountered through Bingham: he confounded its assumptions more fundamentally than has been appreciated. And yet, while Douglass frequently figures in contemporary debates over the future of the classics in a multiracial society, his transformation of the classical tradition is largely absent from those debates. That absence, in turn, casts serious doubt on efforts to enlist Douglass's rhetoric as straightforward evidence of the liberating potential of the classics.

This article develops that argument in three sections and a conclusion. In the first section, I consider Douglass's own experiences of slavery-oratory continuities. I consider the role of bodily discipline in Bingham's "General Directions for Speaking," juxtaposing it with Douglass's experience of enslavement as recorded in his memoirs, and with the classical ideas of nature and artifice that shaped Bingham's teaching method. In the second section, I turn to the symbolic uses of slavery in the classical rhetorical tradition, drawing parallels between three purported dangers of oratory and three purported harms of slavery in Roman thought. In the third section, I look to Douglass's oratory in order to draw out his claim to embody the principles of classical rhetoric in a uniquely vivid way, by virtue of his status as an orator-slave. In the Conclusion, I point out that Douglass's encounter with Ciceronian rhetoric is still

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invoked in arguments about the anti-oppressive value of the classics. I object to these arguments: Douglass's rhetoric is testament not to liberation by the classics, but to liberation through the critique and subversion of the classics.

BODILY DISCIPLINE AND RHETORICAL ARTIFICE

In *My Bondage and My Freedom*, his second memoir, Douglass (1857, 74–5) recalled the day he was taught to pray. He was about eight years old, and his instructor was Isaac Cooper, an elderly man enslaved on the Lloyd plantation on Maryland's Eastern Shore. Along with "twenty or thirty other children," Frederick was ordered to Cooper's cabin, where he found the old man holding a bundle of hickory switches. There, the boys were taught the Lord's Prayer by rote: "The old gentleman, in any other than a devotional tone, commanded us to kneel down ….'Say everything I say;' and bang would come the switch on some poor boy's undevotional head. 'What you looking at there'—'Stop that pushing'—and down again would come the lash."

In a perversity that Douglass emphasizes, Cooper, though himself enslaved, was authorized to whip others enslaved on the same plantation. He was both victim and aggressor in a system in which "everybody … wants the privilege of whipping somebody else." The provisional power that Cooper wielded was an extension of the plantation's routine discipline. Shortly after this passage, Douglass (1857, 103) illustrated a similar regime at work in the fields: "Slaves are generally expected to sing as well as to work …. [I]t was one means of letting the overseer know where they were." Prayer instilled by fear and singing as a means of surveillance: these were not the worst evils of plantation slavery, but they were memorable cruelties.

These were lessons not only in prayer or song, but also in the "proper management" and "decent conduct" of the body and voice. What matters is not strictly the words of the prayer, but that they be recited promptly and uniformly, in the correct kneeling posture, with the head forward and the eyes down; what matters is not the tune of the song, but that it be sung continuously and enthusiastically enough for the overseer's satisfaction.

The phrases "proper management" and "decent conduct," however, come not from Douglass, but from Bingham ([1797] 1998, 71). They are found in his extensive and minute instructions for oratorical delivery, which Douglass first read some four years after the events described above. For Douglass (1857, 159), *The Columbian Orator* was a book "redolent of the principles of liberty" (Douglass 1857, 159); but it was also a book of discipline. It taught the intellectual discipline of rhetorical *inventio*—the initiation into a stock of commonplaces, topics, and tropes—and, above all, the physical discipline of delivery: the demanding control of the body, arrangement of the face, and management of the voice. Bingham's rules for the management of the body proceed from the head, to the eyes, to the shoulders and arms, and downward. Here, for instance, is a typical passage on the use of the hands:

> Side motion should generally begin from the left, and terminate gently on the right. In demonstrating, addressing, and on several other occasions, they are moved forward; and in threatening, sometimes thrown back. But when the orator speaks of himself, his right hand should be gently laid on his breast.
>
> The left hand should seldom move alone, but accommodate itself to the motions of the right. In motions of the left side, the right hand should not be carried beyond the left shoulder. In promises, and expressions of compliment, the motion of the hands should be gentle and slow; but in exhortations and applause, more swift. The hands should generally be open; but in expressions of compunction and anger, they may be closed.

Alongside these prescriptions for the hands, Douglass found a rule that the head "should not be long without motion, nor yet always moving," instructions for moving the eyes over one's audience continuously, but not too quickly, a warning to generally keep the arms in line with the body, "unless in very pathetic expressions," and more. Rules for the voice follow. For instance: "In an antithesis, or a sentence consisting of opposite parts, one contrary must be louder than the other. As, 'He is gone, but by a gainful remove, from painful labour to quiet rest; from unquiet desire to happy contentment; from sorrow to joy; from transitory time to immortality'" (Bingham [1797] 1998, 76, 82).

We should pause to consider how dauntingly artificial this must have appeared to a new student. Just delivering the sample sentence above, for instance, would first require parsing its meaning in order to choose which member of the antithetical pairs to emphasize; developing an appropriate gesture for each pair, or perhaps for each member of each pair; tracking the gestures with the head while keeping the eyes from either lingering too long on one point or darting too quickly; and, above all, maintaining "the nearest resemblance to nature"—that is, performing the entire sequence of calculated motions with seeming effortlessness (Bingham [1797] 1998, 58). Accustomed as we are to value an air of authenticity in the self-presentation of our own pubic figures, we are apt to forget that oratory on this classicizing model has as much in common with dance or gymnastics as it does with literature. As Hawhee (2005, 14, 131) observes, classical rhetoric was as much a "bodily art" as an art of words: "training in rhetoric and philosophy during the Classical period was intimately bound up with—and even, to some extent, drew its educational methods from—athletic training."

In a sense, Bingham's directions were a grand elaboration of the bodily discipline that had already been forced on Douglass. They were a kind of transfiguration of it, as well: control of the body for his own purposes, not for another's. And yet, it is too easy to make a pat distinction between the evil discipline that Douglass narrates in *My Bondage* and the liberating discipline that he discovered in the "General

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Directions." Certainly, there is a vital difference between the imposed discipline of slavery and the self-chosen discipline of oratory. But there is a dialectic between them, as well. Attending to the difference *and* the dialectic helps us to grasp what is both powerful and troubling in the rhetorical tradition that Douglass embraced, subverted, and creolized.[1]

The mastery of the body that Bingham describes is never entirely for the orator's own purposes, because everything that he describes presumes the presence of an audience empowered to pass judgment on the orator. It is not even entirely nonviolent: Bingham ([1797] 1998, 55) approvingly retells the legend of Demosthenes correcting the habit of shrugging his shoulders by speaking underneath a hanging sword. Evidently, one cannot bring the body to "the nearest resemblance to nature" without the threat of pain. This idea points to the most intriguing continuity between the experiences related in *My Bondage* and Douglass's training in classical rhetoric: their complex relationship between artifice and authentic feeling.

Bingham was a popularizer, not an innovator, and one of the central ideas that he borrowed from the classical rhetoricians is the rule that the highest expression of art is the concealment of art. In particular, Bingham turns to Cicero—who is cited more than any other source in the "General Directions"—as the authority on this point. The orator ought to spontaneously feel the emotions he seeks to portray and induce: "but if that were sufficient of itself in action, we should have no occasion for art" (Bingham [1797] 1998, 58). The detailed rules of *pronuntiatio* and *actio* that Bingham transmits from classical rhetorical theory are necessary because spontaneous feeling, in the context of oratorical performance, does not appear natural enough. So the maxim that art conceals art can be taken in two ways. On the one hand, we ought to be able to watch the performance of a truly disciplined orator without once thinking of discipline. But on the other hand, a "natural" performance is an elaborate artifact. (On the idea of spontaneity in Ciceronian rhetoric, see Krostenko 2001, 218.)

Bingham illustrates this relationship by quoting a passage from *Brutus*, Cicero's late-career treatise on rhetorical theory. Cicero is recounting his argument against an adversary who claimed to be the target of an assassination plot, but presented himself as insufficiently angry: "Would you talk thus…if you were serious? Would you, who are wont to display your eloquence so warmly in the danger of others, act so coldly in your own?… Here is no emotion either of mind or body; neither the forehead struck, nor the thigh; nor so much as the stamp of the foot" (Bingham [1797] 1998, 60–1; the text cited is Cicero 2020, 278; see Steel 2006, 58). Strikingly, the gestures that Cicero would claim to take as proof of authentic feeling—striking the forehead, slapping the thigh, or stamping the foot—are all highly stylized, codified, theatrical actions (Hall 2014). Some of us might do these things when angered; some of us, even ancient Romans, might prefer to quietly seethe instead. Some, like Cicero's opponent, might find it easier to perform these gestures on someone else's behalf. But the successful orator does not have that option. Feeling anger is helpful; performing anger is essential.

Think of this hard lesson in relation to Douglass's narrative. As an orator, Bingham's book taught him, he was not entitled to his own, unmediated anger. He was obligated to express it through a set of conventional gestures; only then would his anger be read as natural. But how different was this from Douglass's experience with prayer or song? Here too, he was under the eye of authority, and here too, a set of codified actions served to alienate him from spontaneous feeling—even for these most intimate outlets of expression.

At the same time, however, Douglass's experiences in slavery taught him the profound power of even these stylized, alienated actions. This is especially true, in Douglass's account, of song. The songs of slavery, compulsory as they were, were deeply moving: "Every tone was a testimony against slavery….The hearing of those wild notes always depressed my spirits, and filled my heart with ineffable sadness. The mere recurrence, even now, afflicts my spirit, and while I am writing these lines, my tears are falling." The songs moved Douglass to tears despite the fact that they were frequently *joyful*, a source of the myth of the contented slave. "They dance and sing, and make all manner of joyful noises—so they do; but it is a great mistake to suppose them happy because they sing," he wrote. "Slaves sing more to make themselves happy, than to express their happiness" (Douglass 1857, 104–5). In fact, it is the artifice of the songs, the dramatic gap between their outward form and the feeling that motivates them, that Douglass seems to find so affecting. Somehow, the singers' authentic sorrow becomes all the more powerful for being channeled into its opposite. What makes these songs moving for Douglass is not simply the sorrow that they conceal, but the pathos of observing spontaneous feeling controlled and transformed, and the equivocal triumph of acting *in order* to feel. This was as profound a lesson on the rhetorical mind as anything in *The Columbian Orator.*

As Douglass rose to national prominence as an abolitionist orator in the early 1840s, listeners testified to his mastery of rhetorical *pronuntiatio* and *actio.* They observed his "power both intellectually and physically," his "lithe and graceful" movements, his "flashing eye … and the roll of his splendid voice"—qualities that left audiences "completely magnetized by his eloquence" (Edmund Quincy, David N. Johnson, and Elizabeth Cady Stanton, respectively, quoted in Blight 2018, 113–4). They also testified to his humor and imitative skill, as in his mocking rendition of a proslavery sermon by a white minister, one of his most popular set-pieces—a seemingly spontaneous

[1] In doing so, I am also trying to do justice to Douglass's insistence that enslavement is a unique evil and a term that is "sometimes abused by identifying it with that which it is not" (Douglass [1846] 2014, 330). In the same spirit, it is important to insist that, while self-imposed and externally-imposed discipline might be fruitfully compared, they are by no means equivalent.

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performance that is better understood, I think, as a product of Douglass's hard-won self-discipline.

SLAVERY AND ORATORY IN THE CLASSICAL IMAGINARY

Douglass's rhetorical education was marked by the continuities between slavery and oratory—the same continuities, I will argue, that the classical rhetoricians experienced far less directly.

When Cicero described the harms that he risked in the course of oratory, he tended to discuss them with a conceptual vocabulary drawn from the practice of slavery—to the point that the Ciceronian account of oratory, and the Roman imaginary of slavery, shared a number of overlapping terms. While that overlap might at first give us pause, we should not be surprised to find a Roman intellectual making conceptual use of slavery well outside its obvious domain. In Roman thought, slavery was a pervasive metaphor for a wide range of systems of power (Garnsey 1996, 16–7, 105, 220–43).

In this case, the system in need of explanation was the practice of public speech—and in particular, its dangers. Why, though, would Cicero or his contemporaries want to understand oratory in terms of its potential *harms* to the speaker? This stress on the risks and dangers of rhetoric developed in tandem with the crisis of the late Roman republic, a period in which the republican public sphere—and with it, the faith that speech rather than violence was the motive force of politics—was in the process of collapse. In this context, Cicero began to shift the conception of the orator's traditional *virtus*, his courage or manliness, from a quality of dominance to a quality of endurance. The orator could no longer plausibly claim to dominate events, but he could bravely face up to the trials of oratory and the risks of rejection or lost honor that it invited (Goodman 2021). These, in turn, were harms that were bound up with the idea of slavery, "the lowest condition and fortune" (Cicero 1887, 1.13). The devastating thought of publicly losing face almost inevitably called to mind the image of the slave—because, as Patterson (1982, 10–3) observes, Rome and other slave societies defined the condition of the slave by nothing so much as its absolute lack of honor.

The risk that the Ciceronian orator invited, then, was symbolically associated with enslavement. I argue that this risk, in turn, can be analyzed into three separate perceived harms: subjection to physical discipline under the gaze of an audience, subjection to arbitrary judgment, and the felt need for "defensive empathy." All of these perceived harms, I will show, are present in Ciceronian oratory—and they are equally present in Roman accounts of the harms of slavery to the slave. As a caveat, the metaphorical system that centered on slavery took little interest in slavery as a concrete social practice (Garnsey 1996, 16–7). The Ciceronian analogy drew on the assumptions of enslavers, not on the experience of those they enslaved. It was at just this point, as I will argue in the next section, that Douglass attacked it. In the remainder of this section, however, I argue by drawing on parallel cases, showing how each of the three imputed harms appears both in Ciceronian rhetorical theory and in important Roman accounts of slavery.

What exactly makes a slave unfree? For one, the slave's body is not entirely his or her own. (On "freedom as bodily integrity" in Roman thought, see Clarke 2014.) Instead, the slave lives under watch, subject to the disciplining attentions of the master or overseer. Sometimes, bodily discipline is experienced on a minute scale, as when Seneca describes a typical master's expectations at dinner. While he and his guests recline, converse, and eat, "all this time the poor slaves may not move their lips, even to speak. The slightest murmur is repressed by the rod; even a chance sound—a cough, a sneeze, or a hiccup—is visited with the lash" (Seneca 1917, 303). In another letter, Seneca (1917, 377) portrays an insomniac master who orders his slaves to maintain silence and walk on tiptoes, "that his ear may be disturbed by no sound." Elsewhere, the slave's discipline is treated in a more general sense, as when Cicero (1887, 3.17) notes that a seller is required to report "the health, the truant habits, the dishonesty of the slave" to a potential buyer. Sometimes, bodily discipline is enforced by violence—Seneca notes an acquaintance who distributes lashes for mistakes at the end of the day, which he rather chillingly refers to as "going over his accounts"—and at other times, it is enough that a "cringing" attitude has been instilled in the slave (Seneca 1925, 421, 395). In either case, we might say that the slave is forced to be hyper-aware of his or her body and its disposition, as a result of the potentially malign attention of an observer.

Hyper-awareness of the body is also a central theme in Ciceronian rhetoric. We have already seen how Bingham, drawing on Cicero, made this hyper-awareness a key point of his teaching. It is equally present in the Ciceronian original, particularly in the dialogue *De oratore*, Cicero's most detailed work of rhetorical theory, and the one from which Bingham borrows the most extensively. Near its conclusion (3.217–9), Crassus—Cicero's rhetorical mentor, and one of the dialogue's main interlocutors—delivers a long excursus on the conscious management of the voice as a signifier of emotion:

> Anger requires the use of one kind of voice, high and sharp, breaking off repeatedly….Lamentation and grief require another kind of voice, wavering in pitch, sonorous, halting, and tearful….Fear again has another kind of voice, subdued, hesitating, and downcast….Energy has yet another kind, intense, vehement, threatening, and with an earnest sort of excitement….Happiness needs another tone, unrestrained and tender, cheerful and relaxed.

As if anticipating the obvious rejoinder—*if the orator's feelings are genuine, won't the proper tone follow naturally?*—Crassus makes clear that rhetorical artifice is supposed to be an improvement on nature: "Emotions … are so often confused that they are obscured and almost smothered. So we must get rid of what

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obscures them and embrace their most prominent and most clearly visible features" (3.215–6). Similarly, rhetorical gestures express ideas "not by imitating them, but by signifying them" (3.220). Unself-conscious feeling, in this view, is too unruly, too complicated, to reliably persuade a mass audience. Instead, Crassus instructs the orator to take a series of self-distancing steps: to actively choose a single, elemental affect for each utterance; to pair that utterance with a conventionalized set of expectations about its proper expression (so conventionalized that each affect is illustrated with an example from the dramatic stage); and to turn the voice and body from extensions of one's internal state to *signifiers* of that state, purpose-made to be read by others. We might say that the process of rhetorical training serves to alienate the orator from his own body. In other words, it encourages him to relate to his own body as an object: not only as a tool for signifying affects, but also as a projection of the ideal of masculine *virtus* (Bell 1997, 19; Richlin 1997).

The second harm is subjection to arbitrary judgment, which scholars such as Quentin Skinner and Philip Pettit have identified as the central wrong associated with slavery in classical republican thought. "If we wish to understand the essence of servitude," writes Skinner (1998, 40–2), we should consider the distinction in Roman law "between those who are, and those who are not *sui iuris*, within their own jurisdiction or right." A slave is definitionally "'within the power' of another person." Whether or not that power is exercised at any given moment—as in the paradigm case of the slave of a lenient master—the slave is liable to harm at any time, and at the arbitrary discretion of another. The legal term for this state of liability was *obnoxius*, which such writers as Sallust, Tacitus, and Seneca use in a broader sense "to describe the predicament of anyone who depends on the will—or, as we say, on the goodwill—of someone else." Cicero (1865, 34) draws on this tradition of thought when he defines liberty as "the power of living as you please." Strikingly, this is one of the few points on which testimony from an ex-slave survives—and it is in accord with common Roman opinion. In the words of Publilius Syrus, a freedman who became a successful poet and dramatist in the late republic, "the height of misery is to live at another's will" (cited in Patterson 1982, 77).

An orator, in his capacity as an orator, is conceived as depending on the will of the audience in the same way. The power to which he is subject is strictly arbitrary: not because audiences are always capricious or fickle (though Cicero sometimes describes them in these terms), but because of the structure of the rhetorical relationship. The speaker is obliged to give reasons for taking one course or another, but the audience is not—and it is this exemption from reason-giving that makes the audience's judgment arbitrary, and even fearsome, from the orator's point of view (Rosillo-López 2017, 201–4.) The audience might reward the orator with cheers and the adoption of his position—or, at the other extreme, sanction him with an extreme loss of face. Individual listeners, or the audience taken collectively, may *possess* reasons for these judgments, but there is no expectation that they *give* them in the course of exercising power over the orator. In fact, in their capacity as audience members, their ability to offer reasons at all, in any but the broadest strokes, is sharply limited. The republican audience's jealously-guarded freedom of response means that its power is closer to that of a master than to the predictable, nonarbitrary power of law: it is "unaccountable" (Landauer 2019, 14).

Cicero is intensely aware that public performance puts the speaker in confrontation with an unaccountable power. Moreover, political developments in the late republic made this speaker-audience confrontation increasingly unpredictable (from the perspective of the elite speaker), as the growing role of mass audiences reshaped the challenges and risks of oratory (Enos and McClaren 1978, 100). The high rewards members of the Roman elite could expect to reap for successfully "reading" these mass audiences, and the sheer difficulty of doing so, is a through-line of Cicero's rhetorical theory (Arena 2013). *De oratore*'s treatment of style, for instance, is shaped by the conviction that the orator's linguistic tools—such as figures of speech and prose rhythm—are radically unstable: Cicero argues that there is hardly any way of knowing the effect these tools will produce on the audience until the moment they are used (Goodman 2022, 33–4). A skilled orator may develop a knack for predicting these effects, but not in any way that is capable of being reliably codified, and not in any way that can relieve the orator's habitual state of anxiety (Connolly 2007, 69). For this reason, Cicero (2001, 1.119–21) describes the best orators, such as Crassus, as the most susceptible to shame. The best orators also learn the habit of alienating their own judgment: "the essence of being a supreme orator is that the people think you are" (Cicero 2020, 186). We might say that an orator is *obnoxius* because he has no independent standing: everything rests on the goodwill of an audience that can reverse its judgment, without offering a reason, at any time. As one might imagine, this fact places the orator in a tense and needy relationship with his listeners.

This brings us to the third harm: the need to cultivate "defensive empathy." Faced with an arbitrary power, an important strategy for self-preservation is the development of a mental model that renders that judge as predictable as possible. In this way, empathy is an attempt to sand down some—but not all—of the edges of arbitrariness. Bourdieu (2002, 31) captures this attempt when he describes "the special lucidity of the dominated…the attentiveness and vigilance needed to anticipate desires or avoid unpleasantness." Perhaps unsurprisingly, Roman accounts of slavery testify to the same lucidity on the part of the enslaved. Seneca (1917, 305), for instance, describes slaves "who note their masters' tastes with delicate skill, who know what special flavors will sharpen their appetite, what will please their eyes, what new combinations will rouse their cloyed stomachs, what food will excite their loathing through sheer satiety, and what will stir them to hunger on that particular day." There is no point in asking whether the masters had a reciprocal sense of their slaves' tastes. Similarly—in an illustration of

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typically "slavish" behavior—Cicero (1865, 39) describes the behavior of an inheritance-seeker paying court to a childless old man: "What gesture…does he not observe?" It is easy enough to see why the empathy requirement should have been perceived as a harm of slavery: empathy itself was a mark of inferiority, of vulnerability to harm.

And yet the Ciceronian orator—an elite figure who, under other circumstances, would have relatively little need to mentally model others—is characterized as intensely empathetic. The orator must cultivate, in words Cicero (2001, 1.53, 1.222–3) attributes to Crassus, "a thorough understanding of human character… and of the causes by which feelings are stirred or calmed." He puts an even more demanding version of this requirement into the mouth of Antonius, Crassus's friend: the effective orator "ranges over human minds, probing the way they think and feel….We need someone…who with keen scent can track down the thoughts, the feelings, the opinions, and the hopes of his fellow citizens….He must have his finger on the pulse of every class, every age group, every social rank." In fact, oratory is practically the only context in which someone like Crassus or Antonius could be expected to attend to the feelings of "every social rank"; in any other context, *his* are the feelings that must be attended to.

In sum, the Roman slave was conceived as someone subject to arbitrary power, intensely aware of his or her own bodily conduct in relation to the arbitrary judge—and the Ciceronian orator was conceived in remarkably similar terms. Oratory is an act of persuasion, of course, but it was also an act of symbolic self-abasement. The goal, in this sense, is not only to persuade one's audience: it is to *escape* from the rhetorical situation—or to be manumitted from it—with one's dignity intact.

We might be led to ask: how real was any of this? How is the political activity of the most privileged comparable, in any way, to literal oppression? The answer depends on the perspective we take. From the elite perspective, if Cicero is any guide, the sacrifices of oratory must have appeared considerable. For members of an elite preoccupied with social honor, the risk of losing face in public performance may have appeared profound, a true occasion for "courage" (Cicero 2001, 3.195). Cicero and his contemporaries would hardly have been the last members of a dominant class to imagine a relative loss of status as tantamount to enslavement.

From a further remove, of course, the picture changes, and the profound hyperbole inherent in the oratory-as-slavery metaphor becomes apparent. It is not simply that Cicero and his contemporaries were themselves enslavers. It is that they arguably exaggerated the risks of oratory for their own ideological purposes (Morstein-Marx 2004, 241). So we might read Cicero as recommending that the orator offer a few conventionalized gestures of humility, but as stopping well short of considering any steps that touched on the power relations between mass and elite. From this perspective, orators were free to "play" with notions of domination and escape, or to use these notions in intraelite competition, precisely because their actual status was fairly secure. Roman oratory, in this way, resembles the aristocratic gambling of more recent history: a game played among the privileged, with modest consequences for all but an unlucky few.

THE ORATOR–SLAVE: DOUGLASS'S CLASSICAL APPROPRIATIONS

We do not need to suppose that Cicero saw anything hypocritical in speaking of liberty while enslaving others—few enslavers ever have. Rather, the lives of actual slaves—who suffered literally what the orator suffered only on the level of metaphor—were a standing rebuke to the orator's idea of his own courage.

One of Cicero's most consequential students, I have argued, was none other than Frederick Douglass. And Douglass's Ciceronian self-fashioning was so consequential because, for practically the first time in the long history of rhetoric, the slave was no longer a sort of persona adopted by the orator—they were, for once, the same person. As an orator-slave, Douglass was able to position himself as more classical than the classics. In this section, I consider the ways in which Douglass's rhetoric enacted the three parallel harms that his classical predecessors drew from the slave system, as well as the ways in which Douglass rendered those harms, by virtue of the social position from which he spoke, more vivid, more literal, and more real. To make this case, I draw on a range of Douglass's published oratory from the beginning to the end of his half-century public career, including some of the speeches he singled out for publication in the Appendix to *My Bondage and My Freedom.* While Douglass, a fixture on the abolitionist speaking circuit, often spoke extemporaneously, my scope is limited to his published texts, which are the most amenable to close reading. This section is organized thematically rather than chronologically, focusing on speeches in which each of the three parallel harms appear most vividly.

I begin with the first harm, subjection to bodily discipline under the gaze of an audience. In this context, consider Douglass's appropriation of the classical trope of purporting to tremble before one's audience—or, more precisely, purporting to deliberately suppress a desire to tremble. Calling attention to that desire, and its effortful suppression, might display humility, win sympathy, or indicate preemptive submission to the audience's judgment. In *De oratore* (Cicero 2001, 1.121), Crassus confesses that, at the beginning of a speech, "I tremble with my whole heart and in every limb"—an admission that even the most talented orator is prone to fear and shame.

Douglass, too, made frequent use of this trope, especially early in his career. For instance, an 1841 address in Lynn, Massachusetts, when Douglass was just months into his career as an orator for the Massachusetts Anti-Slavery Society, begins in this way: "I feel greatly embarrassed when I attempt to address an audience of white people. I am not used to speak to them, and it makes me tremble when I do so, because I have always looked up to them with fear" (Douglass

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[1841] 2018, 52). Douglass's immediate success on the abolitionist speaking circuit suggests that any embarrassment he felt before an audience was either exaggerated or quickly overcome. But consider the very real grounds for Douglass to tremble. He specifies that he is speaking to a *white* audience. By virtue of that fact, the audience has power over the speaker not in the temporary and conventional way that Crassus experienced, but in a way that both precedes the speech and outlasts it—all the more so because the speaker is a fugitive slave, liable to abduction at any time. The fear of abduction or violence, especially after the 1845 publication of his *Narrative*, was a motivating factor behind Douglass's self-imposed exile from the United States (Blight 2018, 139). Though Douglass's friends had purchased his legal freedom by the time the Fugitive Slave Act became law in 1850, the law dramatically increased the risks of Black political organizing in the North (Leroux 1991, 37).

In light of the possibility of his own abduction, and of the steadily-increasing pressure on fugitives from slavery, the statement that "I have always looked up to [white people] *with fear*" turns a stock phrase of humility into something darker: a reference to the traumas of Douglass's enslavement, and a warning that membership in an abolitionist society could not divest this particular group of white people of the structural power to harm him. Whether or not his trembling was feigned, Douglass had concrete grounds for fear—which makes his subsequent words a display of precisely the kind of courage that the Ciceronian tradition valorized, but with far higher stakes.

In Ciceronian rhetorical theory, "the (speaking) body is the site of reflection and discipline, the object of intensive labor" (Connolly 2007, 155). The idea of the body as an *object* is important here: to relate to one's own body rhetorically is to use it as a tool for signifying arguments and emotional states, so that part of the perceived harm in bodily discipline is the orator's alienation from his own body. In that connection, consider how Douglass turned slavery's scars—the institution's most intimate and lasting mark on his person—into a persuasive tool.

Again, Douglass's references to his scars both reiterated and transformed a classical trope. The display of scars at the climax of a rhetorical appeal was a stylized and almost ritual gesture in Roman oratory. By one count, there are more than a dozen instances of the gesture in the rhetorical corpus (Roller 2004, 12 n. 23). Cicero (2001, 2.195) records one successful instance in *De oratore*, when he has Antonius describe his successful defense of a military veteran on trial for corruption: "The jurors were especially moved at the point when I called forward the grieving old man, dressed in mourning clothes.…I ripped open his tunic and exposed his scars." This is the symbolic drama of oratory in a nutshell: by executing a physically degrading act—stripping off clothing in public—and passing through a period of humiliation, the speaker and his client win back their power from the audience, as confirmed by an overwhelming acquittal. After first exposing themselves to the audience's judging gaze—literally, in the case of the client—the orator and his defendant are restored to a position of honor.

In his 1841 speech in Lynn, Douglass turned to a similar kind of bodily display. While he does not show his scars, he does invite the audience to imagine them in vivid detail. Though Northern abolitionists, Douglass says, can depict the horrors of slavery, "they cannot speak as I can from experience; they cannot refer you to a back covered with scars, as I can; for I have felt these wounds; I have suffered under the lash without the power of resisting. Yes, my blood has sprung out as the lash embedded itself in my flesh" (Douglass [1841] 2018, 53). Douglass ([1846] 2014, 331–2) often returned to the same emphatic point. "We want [slaveholders] to know," he told a crowd on his arrival in England in 1846, in a speech excerpted in *My Bondage*, "that a knowledge of their whippings, their scourgings, their brandings, their chainings, is not confined to their plantations, but that some negro of theirs has broken loose from his chains." As if to confirm his witness to these physical assaults, he went on to add, "I have on my back the marks of the lash."

Here, an ancient trope is both reenacted and subverted. Antonius exposes the scars of a client, keeping himself at some remove from any potential shame; like Antonius, Douglass remains clothed, but the scars to which he calls the audience's attention are his own. Antonius shows scars that have long since healed; Douglass explains just how they were made. The scars of Antonius's client are on the front: they are a mark of military honor. Douglass's scars are on the back: they are the stamp of dishonor. Last, Antonius symbolically risks his client's standing; but given the stereotyped nature of the gesture, he would have been fairly assured of its success, or at least of its charitable reception. But in testifying to his own scars, Douglass physically confirms that he is a fugitive slave, still liable to violence or kidnapping; the risks of his exposure are an order of magnitude higher. In turning the mark of dishonor and enslavement into an occasion to command the respect of an audience, Douglass does not simply describe his scars: he negates their meaning. And yet, as I have suggested, this negation comes at a price: his rhetorical goals require him to make his own body into a persuasive, signifying, alienated object; his scars cannot be left to heal in peace. In outline, both Antonius and Douglass are enacting a similar performance, but only one is performing without a net.

The second harm is the orator's subjection to arbitrary judgment. We have already seen how that harm is manifested in Douglass's purported "fear" of the white audience. As he implies, an adverse judgment from the audience (or even, conceivably, a single listener) could result in something far worse than the persuasive failure or rejection that are the relevant fears for Cicero. And again, the high stakes of his confrontation with the audience is a recurring theme for Douglass. In his 1846 speech on his arrival in England, Douglass ([1846] 2014, 340) claims that "the slaveholders would much rather have me, if I will denounce slavery, denounce it in the northern states [rather than abroad], where their friends and supporters are, who will stand by and

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mob me for denouncing it." This was not a hypothetical claim. Douglass's oratory was repeatedly subject to interference, from heckling to mob violence—most notably an 1843 attack in Pendleton, Indiana, which left one of his hands permanently injured (Blight 2018, 134). In referring back to this incident, and forward to the prospect of future mob violence on his return, Douglass makes clear that the sanctions he faces from an unaccountable audience extend well beyond the public loss of face that preoccupies Cicero's accounts of arbitrary judgment.

But Douglass's most subtle treatment of the problem of arbitrary judgment took place in his critical engagement with the idea of rhetorical redescription. That engagement is best observed in Douglass's last major address, "The Lesson of the Hour." The speech, a denunciation of lynching in the post-Reconstruction South, grew out of Douglass's collaboration with Ida B. Wells, whose journalism had exposed the sheer scope of Southern lynch law, and was delivered in 1894, a year before his death.

Rhetorical redescription distills to its essence the confrontation between the orator and the arbitrary judgment of the audience. Given an action to evaluate, redescription substitutes one set of terms for another, in the process placing the action "in a different moral light" (Skinner 1996, 145). Redescription might turn a good or bad characterization on its head (as in the move from "liberality" to "wastefulness," or vice-versa), or it might convert bad to worse, as in Cicero's prosecution of a corrupt provincial governor: "not a thief but a plunderer" (Cicero, *Ver.*, 3, trans. Skinner). Redescription raises the specter of "moral arbitrariness" (Skinner 1996, 174), because each set of terms is both plausible and disputable: from the "rhetorical perspective…all attempts to restrict the use of a concept to a specific meaning are contestable" (Palonen 2015, 68). To ask an audience to accept that an action is, say, "liberal" rather than "wasteful" is to ask for a decision that, within the rhetorical situation, cannot ultimately be justified one way or the other. Here, rhetoric appears at its most radical, as a kind of moral world-making through the power of language, and the orator's courage seems to be most called for. The orator's subjection to arbitrary judgment, which is so emphasized in the Ciceronian tradition, stands out in its starkest form.

Once again, Douglass claims that he himself is a heightened embodiment of that tradition. In the rhetoric of segregated America, as Douglass demonstrates, successful redescription is not a persuasive triumph but a rigged game. Douglass's treatment of the white Southern redescription of lynching into "the Negro Problem" ([1894] 1999, 857) turns out to be a portrait of rhetorical cowardice:

> That which is really a great national problem and which ought to be so considered by the whole American people, dwarfs into a "Negro Problem." The device is not new. It is an old trick …. It belongs to that craftiness often displayed by disputants who aim to make the worse appear the better reason. It gives bad names to good things and good names to bad things.

"The Negro Problem," as Douglass goes on to argue, is the work of the same social forces that transmuted slaves into "domestic servants" and slavery into a "domestic institution." There is nothing especially new in his claim that such terms give "good names to bad things." What is much more striking is Douglass's insistence that "the Negro Problem" only *looks* like a successful act of rhetorical redescription—a conceptual change achieved in the face of arbitrary judgment through persuasive speech—at first glance. It is, instead, a change forced through by violence, a renaming at gunpoint.

Douglass builds on Wells's reporting to emphasize not only the brutality of lynching, but also the ways in which that brutality has made a kind of moral world *without* recourse to persuasion. "When the will of the mob is accomplished," says Douglass ([1894] 1999, 838), "when its thirst for blood has been quenched, when its victim is speechless, silent and dead, his mobocratic accusers and murderers of course have the ear of the world all to themselves, and the world, hearing only the testimony of the mob, generally approves its verdict."

The fact that lynching renders its victim first a "problem" and then "speechless" is, for Douglass, central to its logic. What the Southern establishment wants to present as a consensus arising from its persuasive success—its redefinition of lynching as "the Negro Problem," that is, as the inevitable consequence of Black freedom—turns out to be a cheating victory over a forcibly silenced opponent. It is for that reason a craven display, rather than the outcome of genuine rhetorical competition. Douglass then places it in sharp contrast to his attempt in the same speech to perform his own act of redescription, to convert lynching into "the national problem" on the strength of words alone.

The third harm is the need to cultivate what I have called "defensive empathy"—to construct a mental model of the arbitrary judge. In the Ciceronian tradition, as I have argued, defensive empathy implied a temporary inversion in social status, as the elite orator was forced to condescend to "every social rank." For Douglass, empathy was a considerably more painful requirement, as it required him to take precise and detailed account or the moods and preconceptions of listeners either actively involved, or complicit, in his own oppression. In fact, Douglass ([1855] 2014, 391) recognized that the freedom from a similar requirement was one of the marks of the slaveholder's power: "Contemplating himself, he sees truth with absolute clearness and distinctness. He only blunders when asked to lose sight of himself. He knows very well whatsoever he would have done unto himself, but is quite in doubt as to having the same thing done unto others."

But it is in his best-known speech, "What to the Slave is the Fourth of July?" that Douglass gives his most thorough examination of defensive empathy on the

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racial margins. One of that speech's central ideas, I argue, is the high cost of Black dissent—and the way in which the Black dissenter finds himself obliged to offer lip-service to prevailing historical narratives and symbols (Goodman and Bagg 2022, 520). Douglass's 1852 speech (actually delivered on the fifth of July) is usually read as a prototypical jeremiad, which celebrates the American founders' achievement in throwing off British tyranny and denounces present-day Americans for falling short of their forefathers (Colaiaco 2006, 46; Murphy 2009). But this reading can obscure a contrasting theme: Douglass's difficulty in speaking freely about the American founding.

Far from celebrating the founders, Douglass expresses deep reservations about their cause. "Feeling themselves harshly and unjustly treated" by the British, the founders "went so far in their excitement as to pronounce the measure of government unjust." In his qualified summary of the founders' grievances, Douglass emphasizes their subjective perception of British rule but resists endorsing their views or lending them an air of historical objectivity. After deliberately withholding his judgment, Douglass finally pronounces these measures "oppression," but even as one source of rhetorical tension is relieved, he introduces another: "Oppression makes a wise man mad. Your fathers were wise men, and if they did not go mad, they became restive under this treatment" (Douglass [1852] 2018, 61). Without stating the conclusion for his audience, Douglass asks them to complete the syllogism for themselves. If Ecclesiastes is correct that oppression makes wise men mad, then if the colonies really were oppressed, and if the founders really were wise, American independence was conceived in a fit of madness. Of, if it wants to escape this conclusion, the audience can deny that the "fathers" were wise, or that the colonies were oppressed—neither an attractive choice, particularly at an independence celebration.

With this ambivalent account of the founding, then, Douglass demonstrates considerable skepticism of the American project—not just in its postcovenantal "fall from grace," as many readings would have it, but at its roots. How does this reading square with Douglass's explicit praise of "your fathers" elsewhere in the address? Douglass claims that he agrees entirely with the founders, but that "such a declaration of agreement on my part would not be worth much to anybody. It would, certainly, prove nothing, as to what part I might have taken, had I lived during the great controversy of 1776" (Douglass [1852] 2018, 60). Straightforwardly, this is the case because agreement with the founders is "exceedingly easy" in the wake of their victory. But Douglass—who frequently contrasted British abolitionism with American slavery—leaves open the possibility that he would have sided against "your fathers" had he been born earlier. More to the point, by asserting that agreement with the founders is cheap because it is universal, even compulsory, Douglass also calls attention to the way in which his ability to object to the consensus view of the founding—particularly as a Black man addressing a predominantly white audience—is forcibly curtailed. Terrill (2003, 216–7) has described the Fourth of July speech as a movement "between irony and its antidote," which is political and moral commitment. If Douglass's ringing attacks on slavery constitute an antidote to irony, then his treatment of the founders would seem to count as an "ironic distancing" (see also Lucaites 1997; Sundquist 1991). Douglass not only distances himself from "your fathers"; he opens an additional gap between the praiseworthy courage with which the founders resisted established authority and the questionable ends for which they did so.

Aware that a direct critique of the founders would likely alienate his audience, Douglass can only speak indirectly. Of course, all speakers have to contend with the existing beliefs of their listeners. But the way in which the burden of defensive empathy fell heavily on Douglass, as an orator speaking across the racial divide, can be illustrated by a contrast with the white abolitionist William Lloyd Garrison. In his Fourth of July speech, Douglass mounted an influential defense of his break with Garrison over their dueling interpretations of the Constitution and its stance on slavery. Just as striking, however, is the distance between Garrison and Douglass on America's other founding document. In an earlier Fourth of July address of his own, Garrison ([1829] 1852, 53) sharply contrasted the oppression of the colonists with the oppression of the slaves: "Every Fourth of July our Declaration of Independence is produced, with a sublime indignation, to set forth the tyranny of the mother country….But what a pitiful detail of grievances does this document present in comparison with the wrongs which our slaves endure!"

This is essentially the same indictment of the revolution that Douglass would offer (as well as evidence that this indictment was an established one in abolitionist circles). Yet it is couched in far more unequivocal terms. To be sure, any number of variables, from the composition of their audiences to their immediate political contexts, might account for the difference between Garrison's directness and Douglass's strategy of indirection and implication. But I would argue that racial variables should surely be taken into account, as well—that Douglass, as a Black speaker addressing a predominantly white audience, was constrained to work around white historical and symbolic sensitivities in a way that Garrison was not. An audience of white abolitionists might well have been receptive to Douglass's scathing critiques of contemporary America. But he seems to have concluded that extending those critiques back to the founding would have been a bridge too far.

Instead, Douglass made the burden of defensive empathy visible, gesturing at the limits placed on his freedom to dissent. Nowhere is Douglass's identification as an orator-slave stated more starkly than in his self-description, in the Fourth of July speech, as one dragged "in fetters into the grand illuminated temple of liberty" ([1852] 2018, 68). That famous contrast of fetters and liberty points to his recognition of the restraints on Black oratory in even the most liberal corners of white America. In light of this article's argument, however, that image of temple and chains

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could suggest another fact: Douglass's complicated inheritance from the classical world.

CONCLUSION

The Greek and Roman works that are often termed "the classics" are both the foundation of the Western liberal arts and the product of slave societies—and the tension between these two facts is a source of increasingly fraught political and cultural arguments (Poser 2021). More than a century and a quarter after his death, Frederick Douglass's entanglement with the classics continues to play a surprisingly prominent role in these arguments. For many, Douglass's self-education in Ciceronian rhetoric is a powerful symbol of the classics' liberating potential. But in light of this article's claims, I would insist that that claim is, at best, seriously incomplete.

Consider a few examples. In 2021, Cornel West and Jeremy Tate wrote an opinion piece protesting Howard University's decision to dissolve its classics department. The piece begins with the story of Douglass and the *Columbian Orator* (West and Tate 2021): "Upon learning to read while enslaved, Frederick Douglass began his great journey of emancipation….Douglass risked mockery, abuse, beating and even death to study the likes of Socrates, Cato and Cicero."

In the same year, Robert George (2021) pointed to Douglass as evidence that "the Western canon…provided intellectual grist for the great crusade to end slavery….To honor Douglass and heed his prophecy, we must renew our commitment to our nation's and the Western tradition's ideals and push back against those aiming to toss them aside."

In 2019, Joseph R. Fornieri contrasted Douglass's vision of history with the *New York Times*'s "cynical" *1619 Project*, which stressed the centrality of slavery to the American experience (Fornieri 2019): "On the contrary, as confirmed by *The Columbian Orator* and Douglass's own testimony, there were significant antislavery voices in America who hoped to close the gap between the ideal of equality and the reality of slavery."

In 2018, Republican Senator Mike Lee spoke on the Senate floor in honor of the bicentennial of Douglass's birth (Lee 2018): "The former slave who taught himself to read through the words of Cicero and Washington went on to be history's most eloquent witness against slavery" and to denounce a slave society that "had been poisoned by its rejection of the American Creed." Similarly, in a eulogy for John Lewis, the civil rights leader and member of Congress, House Republican Leader Kevin McCarthy (2020) invoked Douglass and the *Columbian Orator* before praising Lewis, who "used what is right with American to fix what was wrong with it."

In this version of history, the proponents of which range from West on the left to George on the right, Douglass's redemption from slavery begins in his encounter with the classics. But just as importantly, the classics (and, in some cases, the "American Creed" with which they are elided) are redeemed by their association with Douglass—redeemed into contemporary relevance and multiracial inclusivity. "The Western canon" and "the likes of Socrates, Cato, and Cicero" are instruments of liberation, because they shaped the thought of one of history's great liberators.

But, as I have argued here, Douglass did not simply use, study, or absorb the classical tradition of rhetoric. He subverted and transformed it. Douglass did in fact learn a great deal from the words of Cicero, from the examples of other orators inspired by Cicero, and from the Ciceronian teaching of Bingham. At a time when classical rhetoric was studied widely, however, that did not make him unique. What set Douglass apart was his success in defining himself, from his position on the racial margins, as more classical than the classics. The idea that the slave and the orator suffered "parallel harms"—and that these harms gave oratory its dangerous and praiseworthy qualities—meant one thing when it was developed on the level of metaphor, and when it was voiced, as Cicero voiced it, from the top of a social and political hierarchy. It meant something else entirely—and, I would argue, something more profoundly eloquent—when it was voiced by an orator-slave, by a figure to whom those harms were not metaphorical.

The classics *did* enter into Douglass's lifelong project of emancipation, but only after having been greatly changed, not passively received. That Douglass drew on the model of classical rhetoric to attack oppression does not lend the classics anti-oppressive credit by association. His example does not support the claim that the classics in themselves are tools for liberation. If there is such an emancipatory tool in Douglass's story, it is, instead, the process by which the classics were subverted and transformed. Contrary to the image of Douglass as an eager student of the classical tradition, I have proposed that we understand him as a creolizer of the classics, a figure who changed Ciceronian rhetoric by bringing it into confrontation with American slavery: a process summed up in the image of the orator-slave.

If we are to use the classics in contemporary political struggles (a tradition that goes back to Machiavelli and beyond, and in which all of the arguments I cited above also participate), Douglass raises the possibility of a better use. We could understand Douglass not as someone who was liberated by the classics, but as someone who was liberated by subverting them. In this view, Frederick Douglass does not redeem the classics. But in the liberating history of their critique, he undoubtedly stands in the first rank.

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CONFLICT OF INTEREST

The author declares no ethical issues or conflicts of interest in this research.

ETHICAL STANDARDS

The author affirms this research did not involve human subjects.

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