

## **Introduction: Frederick Douglass's Rhetorical Legacy**

**Jonathan P. Rossing**

**Gonzaga University**

**John R. McKivigan**

**Indiana University Purdue University, Indianapolis**

This symposium, inspired by the 200th anniversary of Douglass's birth as a slave on Maryland's Eastern Shore, provides an occasion for a careful reconsideration of Douglass's rhetorical legacy—both his written work such as autobiographies and editorials as well as his acclaimed oratory. A runaway slave who rose to become one of the nation's leading reformers, Frederick Douglass (1818-1895) was primarily and perhaps most importantly a public communicator whose transformative power emerged from his powerful oratory and eloquent writing. Over the course of a public speaking career beginning in 1842 and ending with his death in 1895, he delivered over 2,500 known addresses, ranging from well-prepared lectures on behalf of numerous reform causes, lyceum lectures repeated to paying audiences across the nation, convention floor debates, political campaign stump addresses, memorial orations for figures such as Abraham Lincoln and John Brown, to impromptu talks when solicited by his many admirers. Douglass's writings included thousands of editorials in the four periodicals he edited, a prolific assortment of journalistic pieces for other publications, and of course his three iconic autobiographies.

---

This is the author's manuscript of the article published in final edited form as:

Rossing, J., & McKivigan, J. R. (2018). Frederick Douglass's Rhetorical Legacy. *Rhetoric Review*, 37(1), 1–76.  
<https://doi.org/10.1080/07350198.2018.1395263>

Nineteenth-century Americans recognized Douglass for the power of his public speaking, and his oratory was always at the center of his work as a political activist and agitator. Douglass, as Diane Barnes (2013) argues, was the “most familiar African American in the nineteenth century” and remains an “American icon.” (pp. 2, 5). The agitator and abolitionist spoke and wrote prolifically for over half a century on almost every significant social issue of the nineteenth century connected to a struggle for freedom, equality, and justice—slavery, woman’s suffrage, immigration, the post-emancipation rights of black citizens, education, and much more. Throughout this powerful career in social reform, Douglass’s “rhetorical brilliance” both as an orator and author, established him not only as a vital public figure of the 1800s, but also as “one of the most enduring and consequential public voices in American history” (Lampe, 1998, pp. 290-291).

Another inspiration for this symposium was the five-volume series of Douglass’s speeches published by Yale University Press and edited by the Frederick Douglass Papers under the direction of the eminent African American historian John W. Blassingame. Long out-of-print, these volumes have recently been placed on the internet by the Frederick Douglass Digital Edition. A single-volume critical paperback edition of the twenty most representative and influential of these addresses is due out from Yale University Press in 2018 to coincide with his 200<sup>th</sup> anniversary. Such works are part of the proliferating scholarship in many disciplines on Douglass and his legacy. Historians have long used Douglass’s public testimony for insights into conditions under slavery, the long struggle for emancipation, and the tragic setbacks African Americans faced in their quest for equal rights. Political scientists and philosophers have come to take Douglass’s thought seriously, and not just on issues of race and reform. Literary scholars have explored Douglass’s autobiographies and other works as highly influential milestones in the

development of racially-conscious writing. Communication scholars analyze Douglass's oratory as a powerful exemplar of eloquence and transformative public discourse. All of these disciplines acknowledge that as the most famous African American leader of the nineteenth century, Douglass formed a template for later Black leaders.

The symposium includes an interdisciplinary group of scholars and teachers of who consider how Frederick Douglass's rhetorical contributions continue to shape and animate contemporary conversations about public address, social justice, rhetorical education, public deliberation, and other salient topics to rhetoric and composition studies. Together, the authors featured in this symposium showcase Douglass's rhetorical legacy across contemporary disciplines and issues. These essays contribute to the ongoing, interdisciplinary conversations to better understand both Douglass's significance in the life of the nation as well as his continuing relevance to the cultural, social, and political struggles of our present and future.

First, Professor Granville (G.) Ganter (Department of English, St. John's University) revisits Frederick Douglass's 1845 Narrative and the famous portrait of himself as a young slave addressing the white sails of passing ships on the Chesapeake Bay, a scene of his "oratorical birth." He argues that this dramatized moment of coming-to-voice is both one of the most enduring elements of Douglass's story about his acquisition of literacy and an American meme for the disclosure of selfhood. Douglass's speech illustrates his careful manipulation and repackaging of popular images of black oratory. Specifically, Ganter demonstrates the influence of the 1839 Amistad slave rebellion on Douglass's narrative. Douglass, he argues, appropriates the exploits of self-emancipated slave Cinqué, leader of the Creole slave revolt aboard La Amistad. Ganter's analysis exemplifies Douglass's savvy navigation of print and performance culture where he blends theater and reality in order to construct both new public identities for himself as an orator and new civic possibilities for African Americans generally.

Following Granter's analysis of Douglass's coming-to-voice, the remaining essays shift attention to a Douglass's mature and seasoned voice and his rhetorical interventions in key public issues following the Civil War. As Kurtz suggests in this symposium, scholars of Douglass "seem not yet to have accounted fully for the ranging significance of Douglass's oratorical legacy, particularly after the Civil War." The remaining essays remind us to see Douglass as more than the runaway slave who critiqued the "peculiar institution" in his first autobiography or the abolitionist orator of his brilliant "What to the Slave is the Fourth of July?" who highlighted the hypocrisy of a free slave nation.

In "'So Soon as They Are Worthy': Frederick Douglass and the Rhetoric of Educational Exclusion," Professor Michael J. Steudeman (Communication Studies at the University of Memphis) examines Douglass's strong advocacy of emancipated Americans rapidly obtaining education and reveals how it was influenced by the era's racially-influenced politics. Steudeman seeks to remind modern-day scholars what Douglass knew too well, that lack of education has often been used as a rationale to deny or remove rights such as suffrage. Steudeman shows Douglass, in a significant number of public addresses to both black and white audiences, attempting to advocate for educational attainment while at the same time making clear that it was not a valid prerequisite for citizenship. Steudeman concludes "'To manage the double-edged sword of educational emancipation and exclusion, Douglass left modern-day rhetorical scholars with a perspective that navigates between the poles of peril and promise. A person's education can be denigrated, undermined, and delegitimized, he knew. But, he counseled, it must be pursued anyway.'

In "Taking Their Rights during Reconstruction: Susan B. Anthony's and Frederick Douglass's Performances of Identity" Professor Julie Husband (Department of Languages and

Literatures at the University of Northern Iowa) explores “the interplay between performance and word and between repertoire and archive” in Frederick Douglass’s advocacy of African American citizenship rights movement during the Reconstruction era. Husband’s analysis benefits from her comparison of Douglass to the contemporary efforts of Susan B. Anthony in her efforts to win recognition of women’s rights. Studying both their speeches and editorial writings in the decade following the Civil War, Husband finds that both reformers “self-consciously used their bodies and scripted their speech acts to advance their causes.” The essay gives special attention to how their contrasting “performative styles” affected the highly contentious public battle between the two reformers over passage of the Fifteenth Amendment when Douglass proved more politically influential. Husband concludes that “Anthony’s and Douglass’s public personas, in print and performance, provided guides for future activists and means of projecting and protecting these activists’ felt identities.”

Next, this symposium includes two pieces that examine one of Douglass’s most controversial but rarely studied post-Civil War addresses, his speech on May 30, 1881, at the dedication ceremonies for a statue of John Brown at Storer College in Harpers Ferry, West Virginia. The first essay, “All Lives Matter?: Frederick Douglass’s “John Brown” Address and the Challenge of Hidden Racism,” is by Professor Gary S. Selby (Ministerial Formation at Emmanuel Christian Seminary, Milligan College). Selby shows that Douglass used this address not only to praise Brown’s courage in his October 1859 attack on the federal arsenal at Harpers Ferry, but also to force his predominantly white listeners to become aware of their own unconscious racism in a manner similar to the strategy of today’s Black Lives Matter movement. He shows how Douglass skillfully drew this audience into a series of ironic reversals that exposed the hypocrisy behind their view of Brown’s raid as a needlessly violent manner to

attempt to abolish slavery. Selby concludes that the address highlighted “the potential of irony for provoking self-awareness among reluctant listeners” and “held out the possibility that his society still had a conscience susceptible to being pricked by images of black suffering and injustice.”

In “Frederick Douglass’s John Brown Problem,” Professor Jeffrey B. Kurtz (Department of Communication at Denison University) examines the difficulty that Frederick Douglass faced in assessing the violence of John Brown’s Harpers Ferry raid while memorializing John Brown. Kurtz explains that his essay’s goal was “to encourage students of Douglass and social justice to critically examine how Douglass remembered John Brown, and what these efforts suggest for a contemporary vocabulary with which to work through the challenges of advocacy on behalf of social justice.” Kurtz contextualizes Douglass 1881 address on Brown “against the full-throated terror of Reconstruction’s shadow, a terror that exposes our own contemporary anxieties about reform, violence, and the debilitating complacency of liberalism.” Douglass, Kurtz contends, sought “to redeem Brown’s vision and to craft a space in which audiences might reflect on that vision as the racist heat of the blistering nineteenth-century continued unabated.” It is Douglass’s example of how to remember the past in ways most useful to advance causes such as equality, democracy, human dignity, that makes his speech on John Brown still relevant to modern-day readers.

Professor Glen McClish (Department of Rhetoric and Writing Studies, San Diego State University) considers the “sage ethos” Douglass performed near the close of his career—a character most powerfully marshalled in his anti-lynching oration “The Lessons of the Hour” (1894). This sage ethos, McClish argues, both constitutes African American civic consciousness and reveals the pressures and possibilities for the construction of rhetorical character afforded

traditionally marginalized rhetors. McClish first explores this sage ethos in context of the late nineteenth century as Douglass distanced himself more from the role of the direct witness to specific events and scenes of struggle that characterized his early career. Instead, Douglass “adopts the strategy of explicitly framing the debate over lynch law as a trial featuring competing evidence, marshaling metadiscourse to provide a larger recognizable rhetorical structure that he has deliberately imposed on the controversy.” Douglass’s performance modeled an approach to African American activism that carefully positioned himself as an intellectual, civic, and moral peer in the context of his white audience’s prejudicial tendencies and the challenging social conditions of the late nineteenth century. In conclusion, McClish explores the implications of Douglass’s sage ethos for twenty-first century speakers of color such as Barack Obama. His analysis highlights the important and far-reaching constitutive effects of Douglass’s masterful attention to ethos.

Professor Robert Fanuzzi (Associate Provost, St. John’s University) effectively bridges the two phases of Douglass’s career as abolitionist and then as civil rights advocate in his essay “Frederick Douglass’s ‘Ever-Living Now’.” Fanuzzi aligns Douglass’s project of abolition and racial justice with the beginning of radical black studies and alternative composition and rhetoric pedagogies to claim that “Douglass’s rhetorical legacy lies within a nexus of institutionalized racism, formal pedagogy, and expressive performance that has opened both the public sphere and the space of the university to memories and expressions of pain, anger, defeat, and power.” He pushes us to recognize that Douglass’s “rhetorical legacy grows more radical with each passing year that fails to achieve the promise of abolition” and offers a powerful challenge to continue Douglass’s work on our campuses as we struggle against the histories of enslavement and racial capitalism in higher education that continue to characterize the “ever-living now” of racism.

Professor Emeritus C. James Trotman (Department of English and Founding Director, Frederick Douglass Institute, West Chester University) provides the concluding assessment of Douglass's contribution to the African American oratorical tradition. Trotman argues that a recurring theme of Douglass's speeches was its focus on events that needed to be remembered collectively. The act of remembering, argues Trotman, became Douglass's "prophetic witness." Reviewing a sampling of Douglass's key addresses over his half-century career as a public orator, Trotman argues that Douglass consciously adopted a pose inspired by Old Testament prophets and repeatedly rebuked the hypocrisy of all types of American institutions in failing to live up to the stated principles. Trotman's conclusion regarding Douglass are among the most optimistic in the collection: "His use of language and rhetorical devices enabled a nation to continue a long but inevitable journey toward justice by overcoming the 'noise' of bigotry, bias, slavery and racism. As a man of faith who was profoundly spiritual, he drew from language and rhetorical strategies a vision of truth and life."

---

Taken together, this collection of essays invites us to recognize Douglass's continuing contributions to contemporary struggles for freedom and justice. Several authors in this symposium observe that the bicentennial of Douglass's birth coincides with another moment of heightened socio-political discord and fracturing. We need not strain to observe parallels between our moment in history to that of Douglass, especially during the post-Reconstruction era where long held principles seem threatened by a renewal of some of the worst aspects of American politics. At the end of his career, Douglass fought despair about the social and political issues that have not been resolved, particularly as free black citizens suffered significant threats to their rights, well-being, and lives. Once again, gains for racial equity made in recent decades



seem to be unraveling. The brief fantasy of a post-racial America encouraged by President Barack Obama's election in 2008 appears all the more ill-conceived. Several contributors elaborate on these parallels between Douglass's experience at the end of Reconstruction and today when the advances in Black rights seem threatened by a hostile political and cultural climate.

Yet, in this moment, the authors in this collection find hope in Douglass's legacy. As Robert Fanuzzi notes in this collection, the work and struggles of Douglass's century are "not over and his job is not done." Several authors highlight Douglass's rhetoric in comparison to modern day proponents of civil rights such as the Black Lives Matter movement and former President Obama. Douglass provides hope for our time through the fact that his rhetorical interventions in civic life helped move the nation toward greater equity and freedom on our long journey toward perfecting our union. His rhetoric points out the way to guide the nation back to its high regard for human dignity and equal rights

