

Bowdoin College

Bowdoin Digital Commons

Africana Studies Faculty Publications

Faculty Scholarship and Creative Work

9-1-2015

Abolition in the Age of Obama

Tess Chakkalakal
Bowdoin College

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalcommons.bowdoin.edu/africana-studies-faculty-publications>

Recommended Citation

Chakkalakal, Tess, "Abolition in the Age of Obama" (2015). *Africana Studies Faculty Publications*. 4.
<https://digitalcommons.bowdoin.edu/africana-studies-faculty-publications/4>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Faculty Scholarship and Creative Work at Bowdoin Digital Commons. It has been accepted for inclusion in Africana Studies Faculty Publications by an authorized administrator of Bowdoin Digital Commons. For more information, please contact mdoyle@bowdoin.edu, a.sauer@bowdoin.edu.

Abolition in the Age of Obama

Tess Chakkalalal*

What is abolitionism? Abolitionism, today, might allude to everything from “the prison industrial complex” to “climate change.” Despite the different domains in which the term is deployed, of course it still refers explicitly to the historical struggle against slavery. Writing in the late 1960s, at the peak of the civil rights movement, about the context for the “freedom struggle” of his time, Benjamin Quarles called abolitionism “the most important and revolutionary reform in our country’s past” (vii). More recent accounts of the movement have helped to expand the history of abolitionism. According to Richard S. Newman, “Abolitionism was born with the American republic” and “did not fade until the nation’s near-death experience of the Civil War” (2). While historians disagree over when (and where) abolitionism began, they generally agree about its end—Emancipation—and typically focus on these 89 years from the Revolution to the Civil War. If that history has expanded, most significantly through the work of historian David Brion Davis, its objective has remained constant: to understand how slavery was brought to an end. Abolitionism’s move beyond history into an ongoing and ever-changing *discourse* has raised its profile, Andrew Delbanco suggests, not just among *Americanists* but *Americans*. “If we construe abolition in this wider sense . . . what might it tell us about our country?” (3). For Delbanco, abolitionism is a state of mind. Abolitionism is a state of mind, synonymous with being American, a belief in the rightness of a cause no matter the cost. Not all of us (Americans and Americanists) subscribe to such a political program, but we inevitably admire those who do.

Still, the association between abolitionism and the end of slavery is what gives the movement such a good rap. Rather than ask, “Who were the Abolitionists?” as Delbanco does at the outset of his book, *The Abolitionist Imagination* (2012), it might make more sense

*Tess Chakkalalal is an associate professor of Africana Studies and English at Bowdoin College. She is the author of *Novel Bondage: Slavery, Marriage, and Freedom in Nineteenth-Century America* (2011) and co-editor of *Literature, Jim Crow and the Legacy of Sutton E. Griggs* (2013).

The Abolitionist Imagination. Andrew Delbanco. Harvard UP, 2012.

Bonds of Citizenship: Law and the Labors of Emancipation. Hoang Gia Phan. NYU P, 2013.

The Oracle and the Curse: A Poetics of Justice from the Revolution to the Civil War. Caleb Smith. Harvard UP, 2013.

The Time Is Always Now: Black Thought and the Transformation of US Democracy. Nick Bromell. Oxford UP, 2013.

to ask, “Who isn’t an abolitionist?” In other words, we are all, at least in our opposition to slavery, abolitionists today. To be an abolitionist is to be on the right side of history. Not to be an abolitionist is to be flat out wrong. Paradoxically, recent accounts of US literature deploy this spirit of abolitionism—its historical association with the truth—with considerable effect. Reading abolitionism through the writings of Henry David Thoreau, Herman Melville, Nathaniel Hawthorne, and Frederick Douglass in particular, reveals a new history of the movement in which the founding principles of the nation—justice, freedom, and democracy—are radically transformed. While it may come as a bit of a surprise that a moderate like Melville and a conservative like Hawthorne would find much in common with more ardent abolitionists like Thoreau and Douglass, we quickly realize that these differences are less important than we might think. By eschewing them, these works present us with new, though not unfamiliar American heroes, namely, Douglass and John Brown, men who fought against slavery rather than simply for freedom.

Delbanco’s essay, and the four individual responses published alongside it that constitute *The Abolitionist Imagination*, is at once a nuanced and sweeping account of the movement and its consequences upon American life today. Nick Bromell’s *The Time Is Always Now: Black Thought and the Transformation of US Democracy* (2013) reconstitutes what is conventionally called “African-American literature” as “US public philosophy” by bringing together political theory with literary and cultural studies. As his title suggests, Bromell’s interest in African-American literature lies in its ability to “speak powerfully today to all Americans” (80). The power of literature to speak, rather than be merely read, is also central to Caleb Smith’s *The Oracle and the Curse: A Poetics of Justice from the Revolution to the Civil War* (2013), which offers readers a new subfield of US literature that he calls “Martyr Literature.” This kind of writing productively pairs readings of works by well-known US writers (Charles Brockden Brown and Hawthorne) with lesser-known works of nineteenth-century blasphemers and martyrs such as Abner Kneeland and Brown. Like Smith, Hoang Gia Phan’s *Bonds of Citizenship: Law and the Labors of Emancipation* (2013) offers readers a legal historical context in which to rethink the stakes of antebellum US literature, focusing particularly on the writings and speeches of Douglass. Not surprisingly, Douglass is key to all four works; as a former slave and political abolitionist there is no better representative for the movement. While each book offers a different approach to reading individual texts that fall under the category of US literature, all four focus on the ways slavery and its bloody end shaped its aesthetic form and political function.

The intimate connection these authors draw between abolitionism and US literature is a fairly recent phenomenon. There was a

time when the abolitionists—or “The Fanatics,” as Paul Laurence Dunbar calls them in his 1901 novel—had outworn their welcome. Indeed, in works by Charles Chesnutt, Henry James, and Albion Tourgée, among others, the lingering effects of the uncompromising moral righteousness of the abolitionists were seen as deepening racial and regional differences, rather than reconciling them. In novels like James’s *The Bostonians* (1886), the merger between the abolitionists and the feminists in the post-Civil War era offered few advantages to the US political and cultural scene. Feminist scholarship in the late twentieth century clarified the political work of women within the abolitionist movement, but even this conjunction (between African Americans and women) was committed to the constitution of difference. Our attention to the particular contribution of women, what Ruth Bogin and Jean Fagan Yellin called “The Abolitionist Sisterhood” seems now to have vanished. Based upon recent scholarship, it appears that current interest in abolitionism has returned to a preoccupation with male writers and political figures like Melville, Brown, Douglass, and Abraham Lincoln, men who made a *real* political difference. Although a couple of these scholars mention the work of Harriet Jacobs and Harriet Beecher Stowe in passing, their contributions, it would seem, lie in their memorializing the more radical work of men such as Brown and Nat Turner.

Of the four works, Delbanco’s is the most engaging and accessible. Formulated as a kind of call and response between Delbanco and other students of US literature and history (John Stauffer, Manisha Sinha, Wilfred McClay, and the novelist Darryl Pinckney), the book offers readers a lively debate, an instance of a functioning public sphere where intellectuals argue with one another respectfully about ideas. Taken together, they represent divergent views on the meaning of US abolitionism that has become a preoccupation of consumers and producers of popular and academic culture. As evidence of this current preoccupation with abolitionism, Daniel Carpenter lists recent “prizewinning biographies” of abolitionist figures as well as academic histories by Eric Foner in his succinct foreword (vii). But as Delbanco points out in his essay, part of what is interesting about this new concern with abolitionism is how it has reemerged outside of the academy. Why abolitionism now? What explains the appearance and popularity of an abolitionist movie like *12 Years a Slave* in 2013? Delbanco describes abolitionism’s current appeal in moral terms: “They were resoundingly right in their belief that in America a ‘fringe’ opinion (consider the astonishing progress in women’s rights and gay rights in our own time) can fast become a mainstream conviction. They set an example for subsequent reformers of the power of a determined movement to bring American reality into conformity with American ideals” (52). Needless to say,

[I]t is more than a little ironic that the rule of a minority. . . would function as an example for a nation that prides itself upon its democratic values, chief of which is majority rule. Yet this is exactly what abolitionism and its association with contemporary fringe movements like gay rights and climate change suggest. (5)

It is more than a little ironic that the rule of a minority, or “‘fringe’ opinion”, would function as an example for a nation that prides itself upon its democratic values, chief of which is majority rule. Yet this is exactly what abolitionism and its association with contemporary fringe movements like gay rights and climate change suggest. Significantly, these once fringe movements rely upon nondeliberative discourse and militant action well beyond the conventions of democracy. If we characterize the success of abolitionism as the rule of the minority over the majority, then what happens to the conventions of argument and reasoned debate that are supposed to determine how political leaders are elected in the US? Following Delbanco, it might seem that we view political leaders as being elected to represent minority interests rather than those of the majority, speaking on behalf of those who cannot speak for themselves. The rest of us rely upon union leaders and lobbyists who we pay to represent our interests.

What distinguishes abolitionism for Delbanco is not so much its political principles since it was “never a unified party” but rather its movement from the margins to the center of US politics and culture (9). That movement was predicated upon the abolitionist’s ability to make us believe that each of us has the power to make the country (and perhaps even the world) better by making the lives of others better. Delbanco draws this general definition of abolitionism from a specific source: Douglass’s autobiography. Given the importance of Douglass to Delbanco’s ahistorical definition of abolitionism, it is worth quoting in full.

Accordingly, Douglass included in his autobiography scenes of violence that seem to say, Look at me, gentle reader: if you hope to save yourselves, you must first save me. Men like me—angry black men, cut off from the softening influences of family and friends, confined to the sordid “*present* and the *past*”—are longing for “a future—a future with hope in it.” If you deny us this hope, we will become monsters. (9)

If this rhetoric of “hope” Delbanco draws from Douglass’s *My Bondage and My Freedom* (1855) reminds you of Barack Obama’s 2008 presidential campaign, you will find yourself closer to understanding the otherwise elusive meaning of “the abolitionist imagination.” Quoting Obama quoting William Faulkner “in his remarkable speech on race during his 2008 campaign for the presidency,” Delbanco reveals the complex connections between the past and the present through the president’s black body (22). “On that view, abolition may be regarded not as a passing episode but as a movement that crystallized—or, as we might say today, channeled—an energy that has been at work in our culture since the beginning and is likely to

express itself again in variant forms in the future" (22–23). By connecting abolitionism to the election of President Obama, Delbanco deliberately moves the discussion of abolitionism away from the past, a space occupied by historians, to its present and future, a space occupied by literary critics. Abolitionism, in this respect, has little to do with determining who was or was not an abolitionist but in deciding who stands for "a future with hope in it" today. Ultimately, the abolitionist imagination helps us to see more clearly the spirit motivating the Obama presidency.

Delbanco's enormously useful conception of contemporary abolitionism helps to make sense of Bromell's otherwise idiosyncratic readings of works bearing no historical relation to one another. Bromell's consideration of "some black American thinkers and activists" begins with Douglass and concludes with Obama (5). He begins with the former because "the experience of being nationless allowed Douglass to reconceive the meaning of his nation and of its founding document, the Declaration" (83) and concludes with Obama because "he reflects the degree to which" "this body of black democratic thought" "has already entered into and begun to change US public philosophy" (5). Situating Douglass and Obama as bookends of US literature offers readers a hopeful or, more accurately, distinctly progressive view of US history, from slavery to the presidency.

Bromell reads Douglass as a figure of "democratic indignation." Like Delbanco's "abolitionist imagination," Bromell's democratic indignation transcends argument. Figures like Douglass are neither radical nor conservative, but simply right. Delbanco looks to Douglass's autobiographies for the truth; Bromell finds it in Douglass's speeches.

"What!" exclaims Frederick Douglass in one of his antislavery speeches, "am I to argue that it is wrong to make men brutes, to rob them of their liberty, to work them without wages, to keep them ignorant of their relations with their fellow-men, to beat them with sticks, to flay them with the lash, to load their limbs with irons, to hunt them with dogs, to sell them at auction, to burn their flesh, to starve them into submission to their masters? No; I will not. I have better employment for my time and strength." (14)

This interrogative statement, as any reader of Douglass knows, is typical of his political rhetoric. Bromell reads Douglass's rhetorical question as the declaration of indignation, marking, in effect, a point of origin for US political philosophy. Speaking with the authority of both personal experience and critical distance, Douglass's powers of persuasion were without precedent. Douglass has made steady ascent into the pantheon of American heroes, but it is only now, as Bromell

insists, that his contributions to US political thought have come into full view. Rather than ask “Why Douglass now?,” Bromell turns our attention to the apparent timelessness of his speeches. Those speeches may have been spoken at a specific time for a specific audience, but for Bromell, the orator’s words are as important now as they were when he uttered them. “Douglass links his singular perspective, with all its personal and cultural limitations, to his belief in truths that are ‘eternal’—true for all people in all times. His speech spans the space between the particular and the general, and holds them together in a tense and dynamic equilibrium” (111).

In the end, Douglass’s complex political rhetoric helps to explain Obama’s “new way of doing politics” (143). As it turns out, Obama’s new politics, which rejects “the old alignments, the old sides” is not so new (142). To Bromell’s ear, “we catch distinct echoes of Douglass, [Anna Julia] Cooper, and [W.E.B.] Du Bois when Obama contrasts rigidity with flexibility, and narrow partisanship with a broad majority” (143). For both Bromell and Delbanco, the Obama presidency vividly manifests the legacy of past thinkers, particularly abolitionist ones like Douglass, in the present.

The benefits of these presentist perspectives on abolitionism are also apparent in both Smith’s and Hoang Gia Phan’s revisionist literary histories. Through close readings of texts produced between the Revolution and Civil War, Smith and Phan attempt to recover the lost history of abolitionism. Seeking to “expand the bounds of the public to include subjects who had no access to the elite culture of deliberation,” Smith considers an impressively broad range of early-American writers and activists to produce “a poetics of justice” (21). In developing the implications of this phrase through close readings of works explicitly departing from the aesthetic claims of more conventional literary works, Smith’s broad interest in the literature takes on an unfortunately narrow, though not unworthy, focus: “fierce protest literature, animated by the principle of higher law and endowed with the incendiary power to ignite a factional war” (xiii).

Smith’s canon thus begins with Brown, his literary admirers (chief among whom is Thoreau), and ends with Turner, along with the novels by Stowe and Martin Delany that Brown’s rebellion inspired. Reading these works as part of “a poetics of justice” rather than as *mere* US literature, Smith reveals how literature’s contempt for the law morphed into an altogether new literary form, one that critics more interested in the aesthetic or formal elements of textual production have overlooked. Just as Douglass is an iconic figure of abolitionism for Delbanco and Bromell, Brown is Smith’s patron saint. Like Douglass, Brown’s profile in American studies has been on the rise for some time now. Recent volumes such as *John Brown and the Harper’s Ferry Raid* (2012), *John Brown Still Lives!*

America's Long Reckoning with Violence, Equality, and Change (2011) suggest the increasing historical importance of Brown as a political and literary figure. While the historical importance of Brown's raid has been discussed and catalogued, its influence on US literature has received much less critical attention. As Smith shows, Brown's death, and the circumstances leading up to it, inspired several nineteenth-century writers to rethink the purpose of literature. Beginning with Thoreau's claim, delivered on the occasion of Brown's death, that "The *art* of composition is as simple as the discharge of a bullet from a rifle, and its master-pieces imply an infinitely greater force behind them," Smith's readings reveal the "turn away from any merely literary pursuit" (qtd in Smith 32) that Brown's martyrdom inspired. Following from this close reading of Thoreau's response to Brown's death, Smith examines its influence over the making of US literature.

The authority of martyrs is difficult to dispute. For this reason, so much of early US literature, according to Smith, from Hawthorne's historical romances to Stowe's sentimental protest novels, are obsessed with martyr figures, real and imagined. These men and women used their lives, not just their pens, to make their protests against unjust laws heard. Through his reading of martyr literature—which includes trial reports, poems, novels, and political speeches—Smith finds "the gathering of a counterpublic: a community of strangers that knew its unity in opposition to the lawgiving people" (35). While martyrs have the courage to die for what they believe is right, authors memorialize their moral crusades through the printed word and make them heard. This commemorative purpose is what makes Thoreau's "The Last Days of John Brown" part of the canon of US literature and why Smith does not mention Thoreau's writings that do not deal directly with slavery, like the better-known essays on nature and human existence. Such works, it would seem, lack the "moral awakening" essential to the form of literature that "would provoke readers to 'tear down the cursed system'" (36). Through his reading of such martyr literature, Smith uncovers the process by which a marginal or militant position like Brown's is transformed into the truth, even though it is against the law and fills most of us with terror.

The relation between a minority and the law is central to Phan's distinctly literary reading of the US Constitution. While Phan begins his study of the Constitution with a very broad discussion of the meaning of "freedom, slavery, and servitude as varying states of subjection to the law" through readings of texts by Hector St. John de Crevecoeur, Benjamin Franklin, Olaudah Equiano, and Ottobah Cugoano, he focuses largely on Douglass's speeches, articles, and book-length writings (25). Thanks in part to "The Frederick Douglass Papers Edition," founded by John W. Blassingame in 1992 and currently led by John R. McKivigan, access to Douglass's vast

oeuvre is now more accessible than ever. Why limit our reading of Douglass, Phan rightly asks, to just one autobiography and a couple of his speeches? Reading Douglass correctly, for Phan, is to ensure that Douglass's words are not incorrectly interpreted or coopted by the wrong side. Douglass is not, as many on the right would have it, a *mere* defender of the Constitution. He is also, for Phan, its most astute critic, whose writings offer models for its revision. In contrast to several historical accounts of abolitionism, Phan's Douglass marks the origins of "political Abolitionism." He is not only, as Delbanco argues, "the most authoritative witness to Lincoln's development" (15), nor, as for Bromell, is it nearly his "experience as a man who belonged to no nation [that] speak[s] powerfully today to all Americans" (80); for Phan, "Douglass's counterintuitive construction of the fugitive labor clause provides insight into a broader historical and literary-critical argument, whose implications are developed throughout *Bonds of Citizenship*" (6). Tying Douglass's reading of the Constitution to "Marx's dialectical critique of 'the forms of law' as the codification of economic relations," (7) Phan reads *My Bondage* as an account of Douglass's "coming into consciousness, first of his social being as a slave and then of his natural right to freedom" (147). Read in these terms, Douglass's later autobiography deliberately departs from the sentimental conventions of the slave narrative and should thus be read as a work of legal philosophy—"a natural rights discourse" (147).

While shifting the generic context in which we read Douglass makes his work more relevant to current debates over the Constitution, it also has the potential to lose some of Douglass's social impact. Women abolitionists, for instance, are excluded entirely from this narrative of the development of political abolitionism (107). The absence of women authors from Phan's account would be understandable if he were not otherwise so committed to revealing "absent presence[s]" (16). Instead, Phan's "special interest to our genealogy of the slave's absent presence in the Constitution" seems actually to rely upon such an exclusion (29). US citizens, as construed by eighteenth- and nineteenth-century legal documents, referred only to men, and though black men (as slaves) were excluded from this category, Phan shows us through his reading of Douglass that they were included under the little-known category of the Constitution called indentured servants: "While indentured servants may be just like slaves in their material living conditions, their social standing, and the experience of corporal punishment, they are also legally different: for the purposes of political representation and direct taxation, indentured servants will be counted as whole persons; those 'other persons' will not" (13). Since women, like slaves, do not count in the Constitution as citizens, they are disqualified from Phan's analysis.

Phan's critical intervention lies primarily in his reading of Douglass's interpretation of the Constitution, or as he puts it,

“the rhetoric of his antislavery constitutionalism” (138). Unlike most literary critics who read only a small selection of Douglass’s writings, Phan offers close readings of a broad range of Douglass’s speeches and writings to discover “a different and much more radical hermeneutic” (108). The net effect of Phan’s reading is that Douglass could legally claim the rights of citizens through his “new reading of the Constitution” (108). For Phan, Douglass was not concerned with “the intentions of those scribes who wrote the Constitution,” those today we would call strict constructionists or originalists (142). Douglass instead reads the Constitution in the context of “the ever-present now” (142).

In Douglass’s analysis, the Constitution is explicitly antislavery, and therefore “the existence of slavery” during Douglass’s time renders “republicanism as a sham” (143). In other words, Douglass declares slavery to be unconstitutional even before the implementation of the Thirteenth Amendment and therefore is against the founding principles of the US. Not only is Douglass’s interpretation of the Constitution ahistorical, but in Phan’s rendering, it is also explicitly literary. Drawing upon popular English authors like Shakespeare and Byron to justify his claims, Douglass reveals his ability to write for a general audience, even though he was born a slave. Douglass’s singular reading practice, which Phan documents through extensive citations, has a transformative effect on how we understand Douglass as a figure of US history, a laborer who helped future Americans understand the importance of the Constitution in protecting the rights of *all* citizens, a term which he understood to apply to him. By making Douglass central to the meaning of US citizenship, Phan attempts to advance an “alternative understanding of American literary history” (205). This history places abolition, as a political and moral imperative, at the center of national life. Phan concludes his reading of Douglass with a look at his response to Lincoln’s First Inaugural Address and other such disavowals of abolition. In contrast to Lincoln, Douglass knew the war to be “essentially an abolition war” (208). The differences among the constitutional framers, Southern secessionists, disunion abolitionists, or Lincoln’s Republican Party no longer mattered in the midst of war. Reading Douglass’s life as both a slave and freeman, or as “bondsman,” Phan reveals a new history of abolitionism, one that extends it from the Civil War to the present (209).

Since the origins of abolitionism in the US, the divergences within the movement have been apparent. From the insistence on pacifism of the Quakers to the violent methods espoused by Brown and William Lloyd Garrison, arriving at a single, coherent meaning of the movement has been a challenge. We seem now to be at a moment when abolitionism has found a certain currency among academics and the general public. It remains to be seen whether or not this turn to the abolitionist imagination away from its divisive

history can save the US from falling into the despair of present-day realities.

Works Cited

Bromell, Nick. *The Time is Always Now: Black Thought and the Transformation of US Democracy*. New York: Oxford UP, 2013.

Delbanco, Andrew. *The Abolitionist Imagination*. Cambridge: Harvard UP, 2012.

Gilpin, R. Blakeslee. *John Brown Still Lives! America's Long Reckoning with Violence, Equality, and Change*. Chapel Hill: U of North Carolina P, 2011.

Newman, Richard S. *The Transformation of American Abolitionism: Fighting Slavery in the Early Republic*. Chapel Hill: U of North Carolina P, 2002.

Phan, Hoang Gia. *Bonds of Citizenship: Law and the Labors of Emancipation*. New York: NYU Press, 2013.

Quarles, Benjamin. *Black Abolitionists*. New York: Oxford UP, 1969.

Stauffer, John and Zoe Trodd, eds. *The Tribunal: Responses to John Brown and the Harper's Ferry Raid*. Cambridge: Harvard UP, 2012.

Yellin, Jean Fagan and John C. Van Horne, eds. *The Abolitionist Sisterhood: Women's Political Culture in Antebellum America*. Ithaca: Cornell UP, 1994.