

What did Africa Mean to Frederick Douglass?

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Since the eighteenth century, anti-slavery and antiracist activists of African descent across the Atlantic world have sought to establish a connection with Africa. The great American abolitionist Frederick Douglass resisted those trends. Douglass self-identified as a citizen of the USA and rejected all arguments that African-Americans had any racial, national or spiritual connection with African peoples. This article situates the roots of Douglass' position within his long fight against various schemes for colonization and emigration. It concludes that Douglass rejected those plans not only because he believed they distracted from the struggle against slavery in the USA, but also because he was convinced that Anglo-American civilization provided far greater opportunities for individual and collective betterment than relocation to Africa.

‘What is Africa to me?’ asked Countee Cullen in ‘Heritage’. Long before he posed it, Cullen’s question had informed the search for individual and collective identities among Americans of African descent. Campbell writes that ‘In a nation ruled by descendants of Europe, Africa has long been and remains the touchstone of black difference, the point of departure for any discussion of African-American history, identity, and destiny’. Campbell maintains that this can be said even for the antebellum period, an era for which the study of black history has mainly focused on the struggle against slavery and racism within the USA. As Yannielli observes, ‘historians of abolitionism continue to frame their work within conventional territorial lines. The role of Africa in the Atlantic antislavery movement remains vastly understudied’. That lack of attention has obscured a vigorous, divisive conversation among African-descended peoples in the USA during the decades before the Civil War. In those dark times, African-Americans disagreed sharply on what Africa should mean, if anything, to how they understood their relationship to each other, the nation in which a large majority of them were held as slaves, and their orientation to foreign peoples.¹

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Douglass (1818[?]-1895) did not hesitate to offer his opinion on public issues, especially as they pertained to enslaved and free people of colour. He ranked as the leading black abolitionist, and, with the possible exception of Wendell Phillips, he became the most effective orator of the anti-slavery movement. He published prolifically and lectured constantly. Douglass edited the anti-slavery newspapers *North Star*, *Frederick Douglass' Paper* and *Douglass' Monthly*, and he authored no fewer than three autobiographies. Thus, Douglass weighed in on most of the controversies that preoccupied anti-slavery activists during the long fight against slavery and for equality after the Civil War.² The meaning of Africa for peoples of African descent in the USA was, inevitably, one of those issues, and it was one on which Douglass was singularly dismissive. Africa was emphatically *not* Douglass' 'point of departure' as he thought about the future of black Americans.

Douglass' lack of interest in Africa has alternatively troubled and perplexed the few historians who have addressed it. By contrast, his attachment to Europe – particularly Great Britain – has received considerable scrutiny.³ Although Martin recognizes that Douglass' writings on Africa must be understood in the context of his lifelong opposition to colonization and emigration, he condemns him for endorsing the 'dark continent' prejudices of the literate Anglo-American circles in which he moved. Douglass was more interested in documenting the greatness of ancient Egypt as evidence against pseudo-scientific charges of African inferiority than he was to establishing links to contemporary sub-Saharan Africans. As a result, Martin argues that Douglass failed to help black Americans resolve 'the problems of Negro American identity' as well as his own 'identity as a Negro American specifically'. Even more damning, Martin accuses Douglass of reinforcing racist ideas about peoples of African descent – himself included – by employing Western caricatures of African savagery. 'As a result', concludes Martin, 'he helped, wittingly and unwittingly, to perpetuate these degrading African stereotypes'. Martin even charges that Douglass' writings on Africa endorsed contemporary ethnological theories about the inherent inferiority of African peoples. Martin's analysis of Douglass' thought on Africa amounts to an indictment: as an African-American leader, Douglass had a responsibility to identify strongly with Africa. Not only did he refuse to do so, but he identified more closely with Anglo-American civilization, even to the point of tacitly endorsing speculation on the hereditary inferiority of African peoples. Douglass' position on Africa, Martin charges, amounts to a failure to live up to his racial responsibilities.⁴

In some respects, Gates' thoughts on Douglass echo Martin's, although Gates' are tempered by his family's ambivalence about their African identity. Gates argues that Douglass was interested in Africa not on its own terms, but as a weapon in the fight against slavery and racial prejudice. Understanding that proslavery southerners and their northern allies used contemporary images of Africa and Africans to clinch their argument for the latter's innate inferiority, Douglass insisted on the essential unity of all African peoples.⁵ He sought to associate contemporary Africans with the accomplishments of ancient Egyptian civilization. At the same time, his implacable opposition to colonization led him in the opposite direction, to endorse popular conceptions of savage, uncivilized Africa. As a result, Gates writes, Douglass 'preferred to

embrace “Africa” more as an imaginative construct than as an actual place, full of tens of millions of black human beings’. Moreover, Douglass implicated African leaders in participation in the slave trade. By virtue of their complicity in shipping their brothers and sisters to the killing fields of Brazil, Saint-Domingue and Alabama, they had severed the link between themselves and African peoples in the Americas. Thus, Douglass insisted that ‘the Negro American was *sui generis* . . . a new being, shaped on the American continent just as surely as his neighbors of European descent had been’.⁶

Short of Martin and Gates, historians of abolitionism have expressed little interest in Douglass’ understanding of the meaning of Africa. William McFeely only mentions Africa in the context of Frederick and Helen’s 1886–1887 travels to Europe and Egypt. Despite devoting a section to ‘Douglass, Race, and Ethnicity’, *Liberating Sojourn: Frederick Douglass & Transatlantic Reform* is interested in Douglass’ take on Catholicism, the Irish and the problems of racism in Victorian England – but not Africa. But, as Martin and Gates have appreciated, Douglass did dwell on the meaning of historical and contemporary Africa for black Americans. The context of that reflection, however, was Douglass’ total commitment to the fight against slavery and for full participation in American life for people of African descent. Campbell observes that, ‘for Douglass, Africa was an irrelevancy, a distraction from the struggle for full equality in the United States’. Douglass insisted that African peoples in the USA were Americans, completely so, and that any consideration of alternatives was not merely pointless but perilous. He had an open mind. Douglass neither feared nor resisted challenge, and he changed his position on any number of important issues during his long life. On the meaning of Africa to black Americans, though, he was absolutely consistent: it had none. Understanding why he proved so unbending requires an appreciation for how nationalism, cosmopolitanism, anti-slavery and anti-racist tactics, and knowledge about Africa intersected in Douglass’ mind.⁷

Anti-slavery women and men both before his time and during the period of his ascendancy debated how and to what extent they should engage with Africa, and the degree to which African-Americans should identify with their alleged homeland. The discussion became especially contentious in Great Britain, where frustration over the effectiveness of the Royal Navy’s blockade of West African slaving ports prompted Buxton and other members of the Anti-Slavery Society to consider whether West Africa could be weaned off of slave trading by substituting for it so-called ‘legitimate trade’ – the exchange of goods such as palm oil, nuts and cotton. This interest in African affairs on the part of an influential wing of the British anti-slavery movement has prompted some historians to see it as the opening wedge of the imperialist surge that would reduce the entire continent to colonial status during the last third of the nineteenth century.⁸

The Anti-Slavery Society’s position provoked opposition from other abolitionists. The British and Foreign Anti-Slavery Society argued that the slave trade would continue so long as the Americas maintained an insatiable hunger for African labourers. End the demand for slaves by bringing plantation slavery down, they reasoned, and the slave trade in Africa would wither away. Dedicated non-resisters, these reformers also opposed British engagement with Africa because they understood that a presence on

the continent could not be maintained without resort to force. They dismissed Buxton's dream of legitimate trade as naïve at best and benevolence at the point of a bayonet – or as a flimsy pretext for empire – at worst. Buxton and his circle not only hoped to end the slave trade, but also to engage in a civilizing mission by which British ministers, engineers, educators and merchants would transmit the benefits of western civilization and Christianity to 'benighted Africa'. As his critics recognized, it was a short, temptingly easy step from offering Africans the wonders of European civilization to forcing it upon them for their own good.⁹

In the long view, the context for both British and American anti-slavery engagement with West Africa lay with various colonizationist and emigration schemes. Douglass' career stood astride two high points of these movements: the long effort of the American Colonization Society to settle free people of colour in Liberia (supplemented by other, less well-publicized activities focused on different parts of West Africa), and the emigration movement of the post-Civil War era, spearheaded by Delany and Turner.¹⁰ Some black leaders after the Revolution took heart from the establishment of the British colony of Sierra Leone to explore setting up an American settlement on Africa's west coast. The founding of the American Colonization Society in 1816 put an end to those efforts. The ACS forced people of colour to confront emigration not as a theory, but as a potential reality – and they responded by insisting on their thoroughgoing Americanness. Yet, the depths of American racism meant that colonizationist and emigrationist schemes never disappeared entirely. Early proponents of emigration such as Paul Cuffe and James Forten had felt a filial bond with Africans, but their successors in the mid-nineteenth century argued for emigration on practical grounds. They maintained that black people could only achieve the American dream of success and self-government in Africa. Attention to radical abolition has obscured the long, vigorous career of colonization, which until the Civil War remained the most popular variety of anti-slavery sentiment among Americans of European descent. Colonization's programme of settling the USA's black population on the shores of Africa may strike modern observers as a fantasy, but it did not seem so to sensible, well-meaning people such as Abraham Lincoln, who remained committed to colonization well into the Civil War. White Americans continued to see their black compatriots as Africans, regardless of the latter's protestations to the contrary.¹¹

This was the context of Douglass' struggle with the meaning of Africa for free and enslaved Americans. Douglass confronted an overwhelmingly European-descended population which saw peoples of African descent as aliens in a white man's country. That misapprehension could only be turned by deliberate, unified pressure by blacks insisting on their American nationality. The small minority of blacks agitating for emigration, therefore, were doing immense damage to their community by allowing whites to avoid confronting the fact of black nationality. The place of Africa in black Americans' identity was in the air, in short, and Douglass could hardly refuse to confront it. Nevertheless, it is evident that he did so with great reluctance. Douglass' papers covered African affairs far less often than their counterparts in the anti-slavery movement. The *African Repository*, Benjamin Lundy's *Genius of Universal Emancipation*, and other papers featured accounts of the African interior that varied widely

in quality. They featured letters from settlers, travellers' accounts and other first-person sources far more frequently than Douglass or the *Liberator* did. The Garrisonians had little use for Africa. They insisted that efforts to abolish both slavery and the slave trade must focus on the Americas. The slave trade, they argued, would continue so long as slavery enjoyed legal protection. Thus, while *The African Repository* featured nearly blanket coverage of the Niger Expedition of 1841–1842, *The Liberator* barely noticed it. Garrison did not doubt the good will of Buxton and those who manned the boats – he wished them ‘God speed on their perilous, but truly philanthropic errand’ – but believed they were aiming at the wrong target.¹²

Likewise, Douglass does not seem to have thought it worthwhile to devote precious column space in his newspapers to African affairs. The 1840s and 1850s witnessed a surge in the publication of African travel accounts. They varied widely in quality, from sensational ‘dark continent’ works like Smith’s *Trade and Travel in the Gulph of Guinea* (1851) to learned books like Henry Barth’s *Travels and Discoveries in North and Central Africa* (1857–1858). American accounts, such as those written by missionary Thompson and Du Chaillu, were also popular.¹³ And, of course, in 1857, Livingstone published his wildly popular book of travels.¹⁴ The anti-slavery press varied widely in the amount of attention it devoted to African travel accounts, but one thing is clear: Douglass was comparatively uninterested in these books. The *African Repository* featured contemporary and historical descriptions of accounts in every issue. In 1859 alone, the *Repository* mentioned Livingstone 12 times. The *National Era* also foregrounded African news, giving prominent mention to Livingstone over 30 times between 1851 and 1861. They also featured the reports of other explorers. Douglass evidenced little interest in Livingstone. He cited the great explorer’s travels alongside those of his contemporaries Heinrich Barth and John Leighton Wilson in order to prove ‘the presence of highly progressive and civilizing elements in the colored race’, although he added, characteristically, that examples from Africa were not ‘very numerous or striking’. He did, on the other hand, publish news about Liberia. While Douglass was careful to open his pages to dissenting views, his coverage of Liberia focused on its poverty, disease and corruption. In 1848, for example, the *North Star* republished an account of a recent returnee from Liberia who, while boarding his ship, was besieged by ‘poor exiles longing to return to their native land, the land of Slavery’. He occasionally printed more positive accounts of Africa, but the overwhelming impression gleaned from Douglass’ coverage of Africa is indifference.¹⁵

During the long trajectory of his public career, Douglass evolved both in how he viewed Africa and how he employed that vision as a political weapon. The place of Africa in his life, however, does not seem to have changed: Douglass was never interested in Africa for its own sake, as a meaningful touchstone for his own personality or for his conception of African-American identity. Africa was always a weapon in his war against slavery and racism. That war would be waged, and the fruits of peace enjoyed, in the USA. He was perfectly willing to use demeaning caricatures of Africa and Africans if he thought that by doing so he could advance the great cause of anti-slavery. Nevertheless, the content of that image evolved over his early course as a public

voice against slavery. During his years at the helm of the *North Star*, Douglass tended to refer to Africans as the innocent victims of European–American greed. As he grew older, he tended to employ images of dark, savage Africa, the better to underscore the utter irrelevance of the continent to Americans of African descent.

Proslavery ideologues and ordinary racists portrayed Africa as a land forever trapped in a state of nature. The strong preyed on the weak, torture and cannibalism were endemic, all manner of paganism defied efforts to implant the Gospel, and slavery and human sacrifice flourished.¹⁶ Anti-slavery activists took issue with the particulars of that image, but they also tried to prove that Africa's problems stemmed from the toxic effects of the slave trade. As the Quaker philanthropist Armistead wrote in presenting his book *A Tribute for the Negro*, 'Africa is still the common plunder of every invader who has hardihood enough to obdurate his heart against humanity'. Not only were the violence and disorder endemic to Africa the results of Europeans' and Americans' demand for slaves, but the evidence from Africa provided by Armistead illustrated the essential innocence of African peoples. Reviewing Armistead's book a month later, Douglass praised it for documenting 'the natural kindness of heart, gentleness, hospitality and honesty of the negro race'.¹⁷

Douglass defended Armistead's book from charges that its romantic racialism was at least implicitly racist. Whether or not he actually believed that African peoples possessed those qualities (Douglass' patience for romantic racialism would not last long), he seems to have thought that the image of the long-suffering, Christ-like African was a useful rhetorical device. He might have believed that this portrayal had the potential to appeal to non-resisters and even middle-class northerners more generally.¹⁸ In 1847, Douglass invited an audience in New York's Finger Lakes region to visualize

[a] little village on the West Coast of Africa. The inhabitants are quiet, simple, peaceful, and happy. It is evening. How sweet the scene. The husband, and wife, the parent and child, the sister and brother, and 'friends of kindred tie,' have met to while away the evening hour in simple talk, and innocent song, and how sweet the moments glide. [Douglass switches to picture a slave ship off the coast, where an armed party lands on the beach.] When ready for their infernal work, they move off stealthily toward the doomed village. They are met by some wretch calling himself a Prince, who, bribed by this wicked crew, becomes the treacherous instrument of destruction to this abode of happiness, and the enslavement of its unoffending people. A few moments, and the village is in flames. The fear-smitten people start forth from the devouring fire, and in the hour of surprise, and consternation, its people have become the prey of the spoiler. Grim death, and desolation reigns, where before was life, peace, and joy.¹⁹

Did Douglass think that this idyllic image actually represented life in Western Africa? It strains credulity to believe that he did. We do not know whether Douglass had read any accounts of African travel at this point in his life. The first reference he makes to an African explorer was a poetic tribute to the death of Mungo Park, the intrepid Scot who died in 1806 while exploring the Niger, from April, 1847. But Douglass had known Africans on the Lloyd plantation, including his friend Sandy, who had provided

the young slave Frederick Bailey with an enchanted root to protect him from whites' violence. It seems unlikely that those people, as transformed as they would have become after enslavement, the Middle Passage, and years on Lloyd's plantation, resembled the caricatures with which Douglass presented his audience in this speech. It is more likely that Douglass contrived a vision of African life that he thought would resonate with his audience. He would not have been the first abolitionist to do so. When Benezet published *Some Historical Account of Guinea* (1771), a compilation of European-authored African travel accounts, he edited out references to features of African life he thought his readers might find unappealing (like slave trading). The image of timid, Christ-like Africans did enjoy credibility in anti-slavery circles, partly because it had some foundation in travel accounts. 'No people on earth are of a more mild, forgiving, and patient character, than the colored race', a speaker claimed at a meeting of the American Anti-Slavery Society in 1834. 'This is the testimony of travellers in Africa.' Douglass appears to have taken the same tack as Benezet, though without the contrivance of attention to travellers' writings. The 'little village on the West Coast of Africa' was a figment of Douglass' imagination.²⁰

In any case, Douglass' use of the image of African peoples as passive, timid victims of whites' greed did not last.²¹ As he began to develop his own ideas on anti-slavery means and ends – ideas that led to his bitter separation from Garrison and his early anti-slavery mentors – Douglass' understanding of Africa changed. No doubt he noticed that the image of the 'deeply wronged and suffering millions of the African race' was especially popular in colonizationist circles. Douglass certainly agreed that African peoples were both wronged and suffering. But he had no use either for portrayals of sunny or suffering Africa, both of which flourished in the colonizationist press – the former inviting immigration by allaying the anxieties of potential migrants, the latter appealing to the civilizing impulse.²² Douglass came to adopt a vision of Africa that gave little encouragement to African-Americans thinking about relocating to Liberia or other western outposts on the African coast. Although some features of this new view were more realistic than his older, romantic image, its overall thrust was so hostile that Gates Jr. has used it as an example to support his contention that 'the Western stereotype of Africa and its black citizens as devoid of reason and, therefore, subhuman was often shared by white master and black ex-slave alike'.²³

Three concepts became essential to Douglass' concept of Africa as he developed it in the 1850s and later: tropical exuberance, disease and savagery. Simply put, tropical exuberance was the idea that the necessities of life grew so spontaneously and in such plenty in sub-Saharan Africa that its peoples were under no necessity to work.²⁴ Interpreted in one way, tropical exuberance made Africa out to be a kind of paradise where nature supplied not only life's necessities, but its luxuries, in abundance. This view of the question was especially popular in the colonizationist press. An African's life, declared an article in the *African Repository*, 'passes without work, without vexation, and without care'. Africans spent their days in 'a pleasing apathy, exempt from the troubles and agitations which harrass [sic] Europe'.²⁵ Good Victorians like Douglass agreed on the particulars but drew a very different lesson from

the available evidence. Indolence was no virtue to their way of thinking. This view was an important part of the free-labour critique of slavery and the southern work ethic, which could easily segue to a larger indictment of southern culture. As Douglass wrote of Colonel Lloyd's plantation, the children ran about 'as destitute of clothing as any little heathen on the west coast of Africa'.²⁶

Douglass exploited the widespread acceptance of the concept of tropical exuberance to make a larger indictment of African potential. Take 'the busy bee to Africa', he asked in an 1854 address, and what happened? 'He will work for a few months like a little Turk', but 'when he finds that winter never comes, he will become as lazy as a tumble bug'. Douglass accepted the developmental lag between Africa and Europe, but he insisted that its roots were not racial, but environmental. 'The fact that Africa is still the abode of barbarism', he wrote later, 'is often cited as evidence of our natural inferiority'. But Douglass insisted that discrimination explained the deplorable condition of free blacks in the North, and differential rates of development – chiefly caused by the influence of climate – in other parts of the world. In his more optimistic moments, Douglass even conceded that the influence of the tropics might be counteracted by the committed action of Europeans and Americans on the African coast. When he heard rumours that the British might launch a new Niger Expedition in 1852, he wondered why no 'American philanthropic individual' had taken up Buxton's banner. An 'enlightened and scientific corps' might 'open avenues to trade and commerce' into West Africa, he believed, introducing the profit motive and Anglo-American values of thrift and hard work that might counteract the natural lassitude of the climate. Considering that his 1854 'busy bee' address post-dated this article on a new Niger Expedition by nearly two years, however, it is unlikely that Douglass had become optimistic that Africa could overcome the curse of tropical exuberance.²⁷

West Africa was, notoriously, the 'white man's grave'. As the old sailors' ditty warned, 'Beware and take care/Of the Bight of Benin/For the one that comes out/There are forty went in'. Experienced seamen had long observed that taking quinine seemed to reduce the chances of coming down with 'fever', as Europeans lumped together most of the maladies they contracted in Africa. Nevertheless, until the 1854 *Pleiad* expedition up the Niger returned without a single fatality (a stark contrast with the disastrous 1841 Niger mission), Europeans used quinine very unevenly. Its prophylactic function against *plasmodium falciparum* was not completely understood until much later. Europeans devised various explanations for their high levels of morbidity on the African coast and even more diverse strategies for avoiding disease, including taking quinine, drinking filtered water, avoiding 'miasmas' (air fouled by rotten vegetation) by lighting fires or avoiding landfall, avoiding/taking liquor, and wearing flannel clothing, just to name a few. To a remarkable degree, Europeans remained confident – in the face of all evidence – that they could master Africa's disease environment with basic behavioural modifications. In his novel *Bleak House*, Dickens mocked this myopia through the device of the 'telescopic' philanthropist Mrs. Jellyby, who characterizes Africa as 'The finest climate in the world!' to the sceptical Summerson.²⁸

Like Summerson, Douglass was having none of it – though he expressed his incredulity in his typical ‘manly’ fashion rather than the polite silence of Dickens’s heroine. Instead of Mrs. Jellyby, Douglass had to contend with the American Colonization Society and other advocates of emigration, few of whom were as deeply in denial as Dickens’s character. The reputation of West Africa was too well known for them to pretend otherwise. So, an 1832 article in the *African Repository* admitted that ‘nature seems to have ordained’ that it was necessary ‘to pass through the ordeal of fever’ before becoming acclimated to West Africa. But should new migrants spend minimal time on the coast, and travel ‘beyond the atmosphere of the Mangrove swamps’, they would minimize their exposure. Likewise, Delany prescribed ‘improvement’ as the appropriate strategy to combat Africa’s virulent disease environment. Replace the jungles whose rotten vegetation produced miasmas with farms and fields, Delany reasoned, and Africa would become as safe as New England. Draining mangrove swamps, Delany claimed, would ‘add greatly to the sanitary condition of Liberia’ but would have to be executed as ‘part of a general improvement of the country, brought about by a populating and civilizing progress.’²⁹

Douglass rejected these schemes, bluntly characterizing Africa as the grave of the black as much as that of the white man. Why would American freemen wish to immigrate to the ‘pestilential shores of Africa’, he wondered? Even considering the diabolical racism of whites in the USA, black peoples’ straits were not so dire. Without understanding the biology of disease transmission, Douglass and other clear-eyed observers nevertheless understood that new migrants were more at risk than native-born Africans. Liberia lacked sufficient doctors to address the needs of the migrants who, not acclimated to ‘unhealthy places . . . die off with pestilential rapidity’. Douglass cited the case of the *Morgan Dix*, which sailed in 1851 from Baltimore to Liberia with 151 passengers, of whom only 9 were alive a year later. The ACS ‘sacrificed’ them, Douglass charged, ‘by sending them to such a climate without necessary sanitary arrangements’. Douglass was not averse to succumbing to pathos if it would drive his blade into the heart of emigrationist programmes. In 1848 he published the story of a physician who, while leaving Monrovia, was mobbed by migrants begging him not to ‘leave them to die, as they feared they should with the next attack of the dreadful diseases of that pestilential climate’. The scene of Liberians desperate to return to the Slave Power rather than risk certain death in the forests of West Africa was too much for Douglass the propagandist to resist.³⁰

Besides having little confidence in Africa as a potential destination for African-Americans, Douglass had little regard for Africans. Early in the 1850s, he abandoned the image of innocent, noble Africans for a more sinister view. Douglass had to choose his steps carefully here lest he legitimate the racist caricatures of Africans rife in Anglo-American culture. Always more interested in ancient Egypt than contemporary Africa, he insisted on the historical unity of African peoples in order to link modern Africans with the glories of the Nile’s ancient civilization. Douglass did not doubt that contemporary West Africans had devolved considerably from those ancient glories. ‘[T]here is a near relationship between the present enslaved and degraded negroes, and the ancient civilized and wonderfully endowed Egyptians’, he affirmed in 1854. ‘[T]he

once highly civilized Egyptian [and] the barbarians on the banks of the Niger' were one people, however, far the latter had fallen.³¹

Douglass' earlier image of Africans was not one-dimensional. The 'quiet, simple, peaceful, and happy' inhabitants of the soon-to-be blasted village were, after all, betrayed by 'some wretch calling himself a Prince' who colluded with European slavers to become 'the treacherous instrument of destruction to this abode of happiness'. In his more mature renderings of African society, Douglass placed far more stress on those evil African leaders than on ordinary people. Like the trope of the 'foul blot' – the stain of slavery that marred the otherwise fair fabric of American society – that of 'benighted Africa' was a common one, employed by conservative and radical anti-slavery activists alike to portray the continent as the victim of European–American rapacity, internal conflicts, or both.³² Douglass was certainly a relentless critic of American complicity in the slave trade – despite the formal ban on slave importations, Americans remained deeply involved in the trade into Brazil and Cuba – but when focusing on Africa, he reserved special ire for the locals engaged in the capture and sale of persons. The 'savage chiefs on the western coast of Africa', charged Douglass, had for centuries been complicit in 'selling their captives bondage, and pocketing the ready cash for them'. Gates Jr. is right when he suggests that Douglass believed that the relationship between enslaved and free people of colour in the Americas and Africans had been 'severed by the latter's willing participation in the commodification of their own brothers and sisters'.³³

Douglass demeaned contemporary African civilization, but without much energy or enthusiasm. He was not interested in the specifics of West African societies. It was enough for him to generalize about 'the wilds of Africa' and assume that description held for all sub-Saharan peoples. By contrast, much of the burgeoning European travel literature on Africa was specific, luridly descriptive, and deeply racist. Beecham's *Ashantee and the Gold Coast* teems with tales of human sacrifice, war, witchcraft and cannibalism. It includes a lengthy explanation for 'why a knife is thrust through the cheeks of victims led to be sacrificed'. In his *Trade and Travels in the Gulph of Guinea*, Smith described poking his walking stick into a cooking pot and 'fish[ing] out an arm and a leg'. Even the philanthropic Livingstone occasionally succumbed to sensationalism, as when he regretted his inability to convince the Makololo 'that shedding of human blood is a great crime'.³⁴ Douglass almost never indulged in this sort of 'dark continent' imagery, even when he began excerpting African travel accounts in his newspapers in the 1850s. In 1854, however, *Frederick Douglass' Paper* reprinted a long account of the torture and murder of a hapless Kaffir man accused by a 'witch-doctor' of bewitching the leader of his village. Otherwise, Douglass preferred to publish occasional picturesque pieces on palm oil production, African languages, domestic life and lion hunts.³⁵

In his own time and more recently, Douglass' writing on Africa – both the lack of it and its content – has led critics to accuse him of contributing to racist western images of Africa. In the 1840s and 1850s, this criticism focused on Douglass' lack of interest in the so-called 'regeneration' of the continent. A diverse array of colonizationists, emigrationists and Christian missionaries devoted themselves to the glorious work of

bringing Christianity and Western civilization to ‘benighted Africa’. Its boosters promoted colonization not merely as a means to escape American racism but as a mission to elevate the people of Africa via the gospel and middle-class culture. ‘Let every one join in this noble work’, Daniel H. Peterson wrote of Liberia. Not only would ‘religion and civilization . . . spread over that great quarter of the earth’, but it might be ‘the means of civilizing the whole world of mankind’. Douglass was, at best, indifferent to this epic project, and that orientation frequently put him on the defensive. He always insisted that free blacks’ primary duties were to each other and to their enslaved sisters and brothers. He respected the good will of a Liberian student who told an Albany audience of its ‘duty to civilize Africa’, but approvingly quoted the rejoinder: ‘it was the duty of the colored people to stay here, and help to free their brethren, rather than leave them in their chains, to go and civilize Africa.’³⁶

In reality, Douglass had little hope for, and less interest in, the regeneration of Africa. When Garnet, President of the African Civilization Society, demanded to know why he objected to ‘the civilization and christianization of Africa’, Douglass replied that he did not have ‘the least possible objection’ to those goals. Moreover, he ‘rejoice[d] to know that through the instrumentality of commerce, and the labors of faithful missionaries, those very desirable blessings [were] already being realized’. As Douglass explained his position further, however, he revealed his true sentiments. What were the chances of elevating ‘benighted Africa’, with its ‘ignorance and savage selfishness’, he asked, when abolitionists could not make headway among the white people in a slave state like Virginia, ‘with all her enlightenment and Christianity[?]’ In fact, Douglass had made his position on the regeneration of Africa clear five years earlier, in 1853, when *Frederick Douglass’ Paper* serialized *Bleak House* – the first and only time a Douglass newspaper serialized a major novel.³⁷

Douglass never explained why he serialized *Bleak House*. Considering the pressure he felt to endorse African civilizing projects, however, it is likely that Douglass found its juxtaposition of the characters Jo and Mrs. Jellyby to be a near-perfect representation of his views on African uplift.³⁸ It is possible, though unlikely, that it also may have been a very subtle critique of *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*, at the end of which the escaped slave George Harris resolves to take his family to Liberia to help civilize and Christianize the continent.³⁹ It was certainly an expression of contempt for emancipation and colonization. Mrs. Jellyby is a philanthropist obsessed with civilizing the people of Borrioboola-Gha. Not only is her ‘knowledge’ about this place on the banks of the Niger a pastiche of rumour, fiction and wishful thinking (recall that she claimed its climate to be ‘the finest in the world!’), but her devotion to its uplift leads her to neglect her family. The state of perpetual crisis in her household is so desperate that Summerson devotes herself to the rescue of eldest daughter Caddy Jellyby, whose fingers are stained with ink from the letters her mother has forced her to copy for the people of Borrioboola-Gha. Neither Dickens nor Douglass believed that philanthropy should be directed exclusively to domestic needs. But both insisted that foreign benevolence be targeted in focus, rooted in solid intelligence and realistic in means and ends. Schemes for African regeneration like the Niger Expedition and other colonizationist and emigrationist plans from the 1850s failed to meet those standards.⁴⁰

A practitioner of ‘Telescopic Philanthropy’, Mrs. Jellyby had a ‘curious habit’ of staring into the distance as if she ‘could see nothing nearer than Africa’. Jellyby fixated over the suffering of strangers but was indifferent to it at home. Meanwhile, Jo – a kind-hearted, homeless orphan who sweeps his crossing clear of manure every day and survives on the meagre charity of passers-by – dies alone of pneumonia. ‘Homely filth begrimes him, homely parasites devour him, homely sores are in him, homely rags are on him; native ignorance, the growth of English soil and climate, sinks his immortal nature lower than the beasts that perish’, Dickens wrote in language reminiscent of Douglass’ take on the dehumanizing effects of enslavement in his *Narrative*. Hungry, friendless, illiterate, without religion: children like Jo should be the objects of Mrs. Jellyby’s good works, but she is consumed with redeeming strangers to whom she has no relation or obligation of any kind. *That* was what Douglass thought about Africa, its regeneration, and the ‘scheme of Colonization’, as he always referred to it.⁴¹

In public, he was respectful of the cause of African uplift and expressed no objection to individuals who chose to relocate. But he had nothing but contempt for the argument that slavery or the slave trade could be fought on better ground than the USA. He also had little hope that missionaries could bring the light of the gospel to ‘the most pagan and benighted regions of the earth’, even in the unlikely event that they survived long enough to preach it. And, unlike Dickens, Douglass never backed down from that position. When in September, 1852 Lord Denman, the great humanitarian and former Chief Justice of England, accused Dickens of ‘obstruct[ing] the great cause of human improvement’ by his vivid portrayal of Mrs. Jellyby – ‘a woman who pretends zeal for the happiness of Africa, and is constantly employed in securing a life of misery to her own children’ – Dickens backed off. Mrs. Jellyby effectively disappears in the sections of *Bleak House* that he wrote later that year. She surfaces occasionally in the latter parts of the novel, including the final chapter, but the family member Dickens is more interested in is her neglected daughter Caddy, who becomes the object of Summerson’s benign attention.⁴²

By contrast, when critics accused Douglass of failing to check the slave trade, indifference to spreading democracy and Christianity, and discouraging black initiative by his relentless opposition to mass emigration and colonization, he held his ground. Douglass, Washington cried in 1854, ‘would accomplish much more good for our race’ if he would immigrate to Africa ‘and make this country what it might be’ instead of ‘wasting [his] energies in exhausting efforts’ against the relentless tide of white racism, ‘which always avail nothing’. Douglass was unmoved. Early in 1854, he reprinted a notice from the *Evening Journal* juxtaposing Americans’ indignation at the detention of a missionary in Italy with their apathy about the arrest of a teacher of slaves in Virginia. He commented: ‘Like “Jellyby”, our [Americans]’ sympathies run warmly for “Borriboola-Gha” Missions, but oppression and imprisonment nearer home are things “not in our line”’. Garnet, Delany and Coates were just so many Mrs. Jellybys to Frederick Douglass.⁴³

Campbell is right to say that Africa was a distraction, an irrelevancy, to Douglass. But roots of that irrelevancy lay deep in Douglass’ mind, down in the place where

nationalism, cosmopolitanism and his understanding of race intersected. Douglass was simply impatient with the latter. He had no shame for his complexion, and he insisted on the unity of African peoples. But Douglass was chiefly interested in employing the unity of the African race as a weapon to combat ethnological theories of African inferiority. He broke with the Garrisonians on a variety of issues, but he held fast to their bedrock conviction that God ‘hath made of one blood all nations of men’ (Acts 17:26). He dismissed the idea that American blacks owed anything to Africans by virtue of their shared ancestry. Africans and African-Americans were bound together by their shared humanity, not some racial or ethnic connection. Douglass thought that concepts of black nationalism as articulated by Delany differed not all in substance from Anglo-Saxonism and other fashionable racist theories. Delany ‘has gone about the same length in favor of black as the whites have in favor of the doctrine of white supremacy’, he wrote. Douglass relentlessly pounded the message that American blacks were American by the only tie that mattered: nativity. ‘We have grown up with you, we have watered your soil with our tears, nourished it with our blood, tilled it with our hard hands’, he told an 1852 audience. Abstract theories of racial unity with Africans withered before the concrete bonds of friendship, family, property and history that African-Americans had forged in nearly three hundred years of slavery.⁴⁴

Douglass felt no racial connection to Africans because he had no use for the concept of race. But he sensed no national connection to Africans, either, and nationalism *was* very real to Douglass. Nationalism troubled abolitionists deeply. It produced wars and artificial distinctions within the human family. ‘Our country is the world’, *The Liberator’s* banner proclaimed, ‘our countrymen all mankind’. Nevertheless, even radical abolitionists sometimes felt what Garrison called ‘adhesiveness’ to the USA. Certainly, the hubris of British reformers (‘We have felt the glory of our position’, preened the English abolitionist Hugh Allen) grated on their American counterparts. Douglass’ nationalism was both practical and sincere. Over time, it took form and direction that may well have appalled the young man of the 1840s, who still smarted from the physical and mental scars of slavery. Returning from England in the spring of 1847, Douglass recoiled when Garrison, in his welcoming remarks, said that his friend had ‘returned to his native country’. Douglass had hardly taken the podium when he rebuked Garrison. ‘I have no love for America’, he declared. ‘I have no patriotism. I have no country’. How could he love a country ‘bedewed with the blood of my brethren?’ Slavery so brazenly contradicted the myths of American nationality that the very idea that a black man or woman could feel any attachment to the USA offended him. Even in this stage of his career, however, Douglass’ sentiments were complicated. Earlier that year, he told an audience in Sheffield that agitation against the crime of slavery was a natural expression of his ‘Love for America’. A true patriot did not overlook his country’s flaws. Through ‘resolute and unflinching opposition’ he or she strove to force it to live up to its ideals. Elaborating on this theme in another speech, Douglass declared that he would apply his own ‘broad and manly’ patriotism ‘not to hide our shame from the world’s gaze, but utterly to abolish the cause of that shame’.⁴⁵

Douglass' identification with American national ideals blossomed in the 1850s. As he broke with the Garrisonians over political engagement, the anti-slavery or proslavery essence of the U.S. Constitution, and other issues in the years following his return from abroad, Douglass reconsidered his relationship to the USA.⁴⁶ Two practical considerations gave rise to that reconsideration. First, Douglass understood that fighting slavery from within compelled him to swear allegiance to fundamental American principles. He could then bludgeon liberty-loving slaveholders and complacent northerners with their hypocrisy. Douglass thus emerged as the chief exponent of the 'foul blot' interpretation of American national identity. 'The demon of Slavery writes disgrace upon our national escutcheon', he wrote in 1855. Slavery was the obstacle that prevented the USA from realizing the founders' vision and exercising its influence on behalf of liberty and progress around the world. Without slavery, America's 'brilliant beams would flash across the Atlantic, and illuminate the Eastern world'. Second, Douglass embraced nationalism in response to the revitalized emigrationist movements of the 1850s. Delany, Garnet and Crummell – the last an American-born Liberian with whom Douglass engaged a respectful but vigorous debate over his book *The Future of Africa* in the 1860s – told American blacks that they would never be allowed to be fully American in the USA; to do that, they had to go to Africa. Developments in the last antebellum decade, like the passage of the Fugitive Slave Act in 1850, lent credibility to those arguments.⁴⁷

Douglass found nationalism to be a useful weapon against emigrationists. But his maturing identification with American ideals was not merely instrumental. He treasured the values and institutions of the USA and insisted that the free enjoyment of them was the birthright of Americans of African descent. He maintained not only that black people should fight to secure that to which they were entitled by American birth, but also that nothing that the USA promised – human rights, the privileges of citizenship and economic advancement – was obtainable in Africa. Douglass set out to show that Africa would only betray American blacks' wish to realize the promise of the USA across the sea. Had not treacherous slave traders consigned their ancestors to the miserable holds of slave ships? Were not powerful men in Africa still doing so? Most importantly, Douglass argued that Africa's disease environment, its tropical exuberance and the savagery of its people made it impossible for African-Americans to prosper materially or spiritually there. It was essential, Douglass believed, that accounts of Liberia's prosperity be exposed as the 'absurd and abominable falsehood[s]' they were. Only a fool could expect supposedly 'degraded American blacks' to elevate 'the benighted sons and daughters of Africa' or even to survive amidst 'the barbarism and darkness of Africa', which was 'everywhere regarded as the darkest quarter of the world'.⁴⁸

It was not enough, however, for Douglass to tear down Africa: he had to promote the USA as African-Americans' true home. Colonization and emigration forced Douglass to see Africa and the USA as opposite sides of the same coin. Africa may have been a distraction and an irrelevancy for Douglass, but it was *not* so for his some of his free and enslaved compatriots, and he knew it. Because Africa, or an image of Africa, had the attention of people like Garnet and Delany, it had his attention, too.

The image of Africa as a land where black men and women could stand tall had to be contradicted by an equally compelling vision of American nationality. It helped that Douglass sincerely believed not only in the reality of 'benighted Africa' but in the unbounded potential of the USA. The 'foul blot' of slavery and racial prejudice not only prevented people of colour from realizing their potential, but it also held the USA back from keeping the promise of 1776. Protected from enemies by two oceans, bursting with natural resources, enjoying a temperate climate (free from both tropical exuberance and tropical disease) and boasting a government that allowed its people (except blacks) to pursue happiness on their own terms, the USA had almost limitless possibilities – if it would only release the brakes of slavery and racism. Douglass was sure that it would. When that happened, black people would rise naturally out of poverty and degradation. It was that conviction (the optimism of which has baffled observers in his time and ever since) that allowed Douglass to maintain that 'there was no country in the world where the black man could more successfully elevate himself and his race than in the United States'.⁴⁹

The USA did not merely enjoy material riches. It also benefited from its foundation in European – specifically British – culture. Douglass did not only reject Africa because he was a nationalist, but also because of his faith in Western Civilization. He was a thoroughgoing Victorian in his manners and morals. Victorianism, like any culture, was multifaceted and diverse, and its long life span renders it even more difficult to generalize about its qualities. No single individual embodied the culture in all its complexity, but Douglass came as close as any. His Anglophilia, concern with personal propriety, belief in the value of education and literacy, and optimistic Protestant piety placed him squarely in the mainstream of respectable Anglo-American middle-class culture. No one on either side of the Atlantic could rival his faith in that most fundamental of Victorian values – progress – a protean term whose exponents understood as meaning both material and moral betterment driven by humankind under God's benevolent direction. Daniel Walker Howe has recently called these people 'The Improvers' for their ambitious plans for bettering the human condition, and Douglass was emphatically one of them.⁵⁰

This Victorian orientation had fateful consequences for Douglass' orientation to Africa. As Temperley observes apropos the 1841 Niger Expedition, 'Cultural relativism was not a viewpoint that commended itself to the minds of Victorians'. The members of that expedition, well-meaning as they were, could not help interpreting Africa through a haze of prejudices embedded in their culture. Douglass shared these attitudes – with the singular exception of his disinterest in African uplift. Douglass, as we have seen, saw the regeneration of Africa as a luxury that African-Americans could ill afford, considering the injustices they struggled against at home. To go to Africa, he warned, would only shut American blacks away from 'the enlightening influences of an advancing civilization'. To deny that Africa lagged 'behind Europe in the pathway to improvement [was] madness', he charged. Moreover, it was more likely that migrants from western cultures would be Africanized than the other way around. 'The successful colonization of the civilized has always led to the serfdom or extermination of the barbarians with whom they come in contact', James

McCune Smith warned in *Douglass' Paper* in 1851. African emigration would result in the loss or corruption of African-Americans' western culture. To a committed Victorian like Douglass, that would be a disaster indeed.⁵¹

In 1886, Helen and Douglass boarded the steamer *City of Rome* for a few months in Europe. Early the next year, while touring Italy, they decided to extend their trip into Greece and Egypt. Douglass was so giddy with excitement that he doubted he would be able to sleep that night. The couple enjoyed the trip immensely. They marvelled at the pyramids, saw camel caravans, visited mosques and marvelled sadly at the hordes of beggars, like ordinary tourists. But they were not ordinary tourists. As always, Douglass' life in slavery provided the context for how he distilled his travels' meaning. 'It is no small thing to see the land of Joseph and his brethren', he wrote in his diary, 'and from which Moses led the Children of Abraham out of the house of Bondage'. He disapproved of the 'hooded and veiled women', who not only were the slaves of men's 'lusts' but 'worst is they seem to like to have it so'. He took special delight when he attended a Unitarian service led by an American. 'Egypt that gave knowledge to western Europe two thousand years ago, was now sitting at the feet of the west, and receiving instruction from a part of the Western world then unknown!' And, of course, Douglass drew lessons about race. Most Egyptians, he thought, would be seen as mulattoes in the USA, and he commended Islam for making no distinctions based on colour. Among the longshoremen at Port Said were several 'genuine negroes', who 'seemed not a whit behind their fellow workmen either in noise or physical ability'. Douglass and Helen did not visit Africa beyond Egypt, nor does it seem they ever considered doing so.⁵²

Douglass' orientation to Africa remained remarkably stable over time. While bitterly disappointed in the sweeping tide of racism and apathy that followed the end of Reconstruction, Douglass resisted emigrationist, black nationalist and pan-African movements. Nevertheless, during the World's Columbian Exhibition in Chicago in 1893, he twice visited the 'Dahomean Village', whose Fon people treated the old warrior with great deference. He could not find much to admire about the Fon, however. And he was absolutely convinced that the display was intended to 'exhibit [the Dahomeans'] barbarism, and increase American contempt for the negro intellect'. As it was in the 1850s, so it remained in the 1890s: attention to Africa inhibited the progress of black people in the USA.⁵³

His polite attention to the Fon notwithstanding, Douglass' early lack of interest in sub-Saharan Africa persisted into his post-war career. If anything, he became even more dismissive of the idea that American blacks had any obligations to Africa. The notion that 'colored people in America owe something to Africa', he told an 1894 audience, was a 'sentimental idea that makes colonization very fascinating to dreamers of both colors'. His assessment of American Jellybys had not changed. It was true that 'a few preachers and laymen with a missionary turn of mind' might 'easily be spared', but he had no patience for the argument that Africa demanded black America's 'best men'. They were sorely needed in the States. 'We have a fight on our hands right here', he pointed out, and half-heartedly suggested that advancing the race in America would raise the status of 'the negro in Africa'. But that was a weak afterthought. His point

was the same in 1894 as it had been in 1854: ‘this native land talk is nonsense. The native land of the American negro is America. His bones, his muscles, his sinews, are all American.’⁵⁴

Douglass’ struggle with the meaning of Africa should compel historians to wrestle with the larger meaning of Africa in the movement against slavery and racism. Yannielli writes that Thompson’s experience ‘forces us to pay closer attention to the key role of Africa within the transatlantic antislavery movement’. It ‘points to a vibrant, on-going interaction with Africa. American abolitionists insisted that reading reports from the African front renewed their commitment to “wage war with slavery” at home.’⁵⁵ Yannielli is no doubt correct in Thompson’s case, and his statement also holds for activists like Coates and Delany. But it is by no means clear that Africa was meaningful for other abolitionists or for the movement as a whole. Some abolitionists were energized by engaging with African affairs, but others plainly were not. Those like Thompson who were, however, forced their counterparts to consider what Africa did or should mean to them. It pushed them to ask difficult questions about race, nationalism, obligation and identity. It also prompted reflection on bread-and-butter issues like priorities and resources, matters that were of special moment to cash-strapped black abolitionists. Africa meant little to Douglass, but it meant very much indeed to other women and men in the movement. Douglass made himself one of the most articulate and critical American nationalists of the nineteenth century. In doing so, he developed a searing critique of what would come to be called pan-Africanism. He accomplished those feats in no small part because of those Americans for whom Africa meant a great deal.

Acknowledgements

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Notes

- [1] Joseph Yannielli, *My Soul’s High Song: The Collected Writings of Countee Cullen, Voice of the Harlem Renaissance*, ed. Gerald Early (New York: Doubleday, 1991), 104–8; James T. Campbell, *Middle Passages: African-American Journeys to Africa, 1787–2005* (New York: Penguin, 2006), 64. Joseph Yannielli, ‘George Thompson Among the Africans: Empathy, Authority, and Insanity in the Age of Abolition’, *Journal of American History* 96, no. 4 (March 2010): 979–1000. W. Caleb McDaniel, *The Problem of Democracy in the Age of Slavery: Garrisonian Abolitionists and Transatlantic Reform* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2013), is emblematic of a recent transnational turn in anti-slavery and reform studies. Sidbury, *Becoming African in America: Race and Nation in the Early Black Atlantic* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2007), applies Campbell’s argument about the antebellum period to the Anglo-American Atlantic in the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, fleshing out ideas advanced conceptually by Paul Gilroy in *The Black Atlantic: Modernity and Double-Consciousness* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1993).

- [2] The three Douglass autobiographies are *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, An American Slave* (Boston: Published at the Anti-slavery Office, 1845); *My Bondage and My Freedom* (New York: Miller, Orton, and Mulligan, 1855); *Life and Times of Frederick Douglass* (Hartford, CT: Park Publishing, 1881). On Douglass, the latest major biography is William S. McFeely, *Frederick Douglass* (New York: W.W. Norton, 1995).
- [3] As in Alan J. Rice and Martin Crawford, eds., *Liberating Sojourn: Frederick Douglass & Transatlantic Reform* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1999).
- [4] Waldo E. Martin, Jr., *The Mind of Frederick Douglass* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1985), 207–8. Similarly, Sundstrom writes: ‘Douglass’s conception of interdependent U.S identity leaves no choice for the black American but to be an American, and if being an American proves to be impossible, then the black American is left without even an identity’. Sundstrom, ‘Frederick Douglass’s Longing for the End of Race’, *Philosophia Africana* 8 (August 2005): 143–70 (quotation at 162).
- [5] D[avid] J[ames] M[cCord], ‘Africans at Home’ *Southern Quarterly Review* n.s. 10 (July 1854): 70–96, concluded with:
- we must cease the disgusting picture of a people, whose savage and shocking barbarities, and loathsome habits, and horrid crimes, are supposed to establish a condition so preferable to that of slavery to the white man, that the fleets of civilized Europe and America, are employed to maintain and perfect them in it. (96)
- [6] Henry Louis Gates Jr., *Wonders of the African World* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1999), 7. Robert S. Levine also considers Douglass’ considerations about Africa in *Martin Delany, Frederick Douglass, and the Politics of Representative Identity* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1997), chap. 3.
- [7] Campbell, *Middle Passages*, 67. McFeely, *Frederick Douglass*, chap. 24; Rice and Crawford, eds., *Liberating Sojourn*, part 4. On Douglass’ changing views of politics and the US constitution, see James Oakes, *The Radical and the Republican: Frederick Douglass, Abraham Lincoln, and the Triumph of Antislavery Politics* (New York: W.W. Norton, 2007), 14–21; David W. Blight, *Frederick Douglass’ Civil War: Keeping Faith in Jubilee* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1989); John Stauffer, *Giants: The Parallel Lives of Frederick Douglass and Abraham Lincoln* (New York: Twelve, 2008). Gates Jr. observes that Douglass was hardly the only leading black American to dismiss the relevance of Africa to African Americans’ identity. Richard Pryor’s infamous ‘thank God for slavery skit’, he writes, ‘unwittingly summarized one persistent view among African Americans’ that cannot be ignored, ‘because its pedigree includes far too many distinguished black intellectuals’. Gates, *Wonders of the African World*, 7.
- [8] Richard Huzzey, *Freedom Burning: Anti-Slavery and Empire in Victorian Britain* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2012); Howard Temperley, ‘Anti-slavery as a Form of Cultural Imperialism’, in *Anti-slavery, Religion, and Reform: Essays in Memory of Roger Anstey*, ed. Christine Bolt and Seymour Drescher (Folkestone: Archon Books, 1980), 335–50; Mary Louise Pratt, *Imperial Eyes: Travel Writing and Transculturation* (London: Routledge, 1992); Deirdre Coleman, *Romantic Colonization and British Anti-slavery* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005); Zoë Laidlaw, ‘Slavery, Settlers and Indigenous Dispossession: Britain’s empire through the lens of Liberia’, *Journal of Colonialism and Colonial History* 13, no. 1 (2012) <http://muse.jhu.edu/> (accessed March 26, 2014).
- [9] David Lambert, ‘Sierra Leone and Other Sites in the War of Representation Over Slavery’, *History Workshop Journal* 64, no. 1 (Fall 2007): 103–32; Howard Temperley, *White Dreams, Black Africa: The Antislavery Expedition to the Niger* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1991), and *British Antislavery, 1833–1870* (London: Longman, 1972). The classic statement of British interest in Africa remains indispensable: Philip D. Curtin, *The Image of Africa: British Ideas and Action, 1780–1850* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1964).
- [10] Eric Burin, *Slavery and the Peculiar Solution: A History of the American Colonization Society* (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 2005); Tunde Adeleke, *Unafrikan Americans:*

- Nineteenth Century Black Nationalists and the Civilizing Mission* (Lexington: University of Kentucky Press, 1998); Gregory Mixon, 'Henry McNeal Turner Versus the Tuskegee Machine in the Nineteenth Century', *Journal Of Negro History* 79, no. 4 (September 1994): 363–81.
- [11] On these developments, see Sidbury, *Becoming African in America*; also Dickson D. Bruce Jr., 'National Identity and African-American Colonization, 1773–1817', *Historian* 58, no. 1 (Autumn 1995): 15–28; Floyd J. Miller, *The Search for Black Nationality: Black Emigration and Colonization, 1787–1863* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1975), 25–50; Eric Foner, *The Fiery Trial: Abraham Lincoln and American Slavery* (New York: W.W. Norton, 2010), 18–22. Oakes has recently suggested that Lincoln's infamous 1862 meeting with a delegation of African-American leaders, at which he urged them to adopt voluntary emigration, should be understood as a tactical effort to placate critics of emancipation and not as a measure of his views on black nationality. James Oakes, *Freedom National: The Destruction of Slavery in the United States, 1861–1865* (New York: W.W. Norton & Co., 2013), 308–10.
- [12] *Liberator*, April 2, 1841. On the black press, see Stephen G. Hall, *A Faithful Account of the Race: African-American Historical Writing in Nineteenth-Century America* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2009), 32–3.
- [13] On Thompson, see Yannielli, 'George Thompson Among the Africans', 981; Paul Du Chaillu, *Explorations and Adventures in Equatorial Africa ...* (New York: Harper, 1861). Curtin, *The Image of Africa*, chap. 13, and Tim Youngs, 'Africa/The Congo: The Politics of Darkness', in *The Cambridge Companion to Travel Writing*, ed. Peter Hulme and Tim Youngs (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 156–73 assess the surge in mid-century travel accounts.
- [14] David Livingstone, *Missionary Travels and Researches in South Africa: Including a Sketch of Sixteen Years' Residence in the Interior of Africa ...* (London: John Murray, 1857).
- [15] 'The Douglass Institute: An Address Delivered in Baltimore, Maryland, on 29 September 1865', in John W. Blassingame and John R. McKivigan, eds., *The Frederick Douglass Papers*, Ser. 1: *Speeches, Debates, and Interviews*, Vol. 4, 1864–1880, 94; *North Star*, September 8, 1848. For a positive account, see 'Central Africa', *North Star*, June 22, 1849, an article reprinted from the *Christian Index* which combines observations from several travel accounts, including those of Mungo Park and Richard Lemon Lander.
- [16] See, for example, E. N. Elliott, *Cotton is King, and Pro-Slavery Arguments ...* (Augusta, Ga.: Pritchard, Abbott, and Loomis, 1860), 593, quoting the Landers.
- [17] *North Star*, March 17, 1848, April 7, 1849. Wilson Armistead, *A Tribute for the Negro: Being a Vindication of the Moral, Intellectual, and Religious Capabilities of the Coloured Portion of Mankind: with Particular Reference to the African Race* (Manchester: W. Irwin, 1848).
- [18] Middle-class northerners seem to have been susceptible to appeals based on violence, increasingly seen as unnatural and immoral. See Rachel Hope Cleves, *The Reign of Terror in America: Visions of Violence from Anti-Jacobinism to Antislavery* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), chap. 3; Elizabeth B. Clark, 'The Sacred Rights of the Weak: Pain, Sympathy, and the Culture of Individual Rights in Antebellum America', *Journal of American History* 82, no. 2 (1995): 463–93.
- [19] 'Pioneers in a Holy Cause: An Address Delivered in Canandaigua, New York, on 2 August 1847', in Blassingame, ed., *Douglass Papers*, Ser. 1, Vol. 2, 75. 'Friends of Kindred Tiel!' is from 'The Insurrection', *The Liberator*, September 3, 1831.
- [20] *North Star*, April 7, 1849; *First Annual Report of the American Anti-Slavery Society ...* (New York: Dorr and Butterfield, 1834), 22. Jonathan D. Sassi, 'Africans in the Quaker Image: Anthony Benezet, African Travel Narratives, and Revolutionary-Era Antislavery', *Journal of Early Modern History* 10, no. 1 (2006): 95–130. On romantic racialism, see George M. Frederickson, *The Black Image in the White Mind: The Debate on Afro-American Character and Destiny, 1817–1914* (1971; Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press, 1987), chap. 4.

- [21] Douglass did not, despite his friendship with Stowe, have much use for the character of Uncle Tom. Whites might think that blacks were a 'quiet, inoffensive people, a nation of Uncle Toms', but Douglass likened them to William Tell and George Washington in their eagerness to resist oppression with violence. 'Colored Men's Rights in this Republic: An Address Delivered in New York, New York, on 14 May 1857', in Blassingame, ed., *Douglass Papers*, Ser. 1, Vol. 3, 148–9.
- [22] 'Further Liberian Testimony', *African Repository* 35 (January 1859), 24. The image of Africa in the missionary press was considerably more realistic, which may be why Douglass sharply distinguished between colonization (staunchly against) and missions, to which he had no objections. Thompson's account of his years at the American Missionary Society's Mendi Mission in West Africa portrays the region as riven by endemic warfare and crippling disease. *Thompson in Africa: An Account of the Missionary Labors, Sufferings, Travels, and Observations, of George Thompson in Western Africa, at the Mendi Mission* (Dayton: Printed for the Author, 1857), 127 (war), 69 (disease). Gale Kenny makes similar arguments about abolitionist missionaries in Jamaica. *Contentious Liberties: American Abolitionists in Post-Emancipation Jamaica, 1834–1866* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2010).
- [23] Gates, *Wonders of the African World*, 7. Martin writes that Douglass 'exploited debasing Western stereotypes of Africans, displaying the typical Western insensitivity to sociocultural differences between the West and Africa', *The Mind of Frederick Douglass*, 208.
- [24] Curtin, *The Image of Africa*, chap 3.
- [25] 'Character and Habits of the Africans', *African Repository* 2, no. 1 (March 1826), 19. The article claimed to be based on 'Golberry's Travels', presumably *Travels in Africa, Performed by Silvester Meinrad Xavier Golberry, in the Western Parts of that Vast Continent . . .* trans. W. Mudford, 2 vols. (London: Jones and Bumford, 1808).
- [26] Douglass, *My Bondage and My Freedom*, 101. Ronald G. Walters, 'The Erotic South: Civilization and Sexuality in American Abolitionism', *American Quarterly* 25, no. 2 (May 1973): 177–201.
- [27] 'Work and Self-Elevation: An Address Delivered in Cincinnati, Ohio, on 14 April 1854', in Blassingame, ed., *Douglass Papers*, Ser. 1, Vol. 2, 476–7; 'Citizenship and the Spirit of Caste: An Address Delivered in New York, New York on 11 May 1858', *Douglass Papers*, Ser. 1, Vol. 3, 1855–63, 212; 'Another Niger Expedition', *Frederick Douglass' Paper*, December 17, 1852.
- [28] Quoted in Marcus Rediker, *The Slave Ship: A Human History* (New York: Penguin, 2008), 7; Charles Dickens, *Bleak House* (London: Bradbury and Evans, 1853), 27. On the long history of the British struggle with 'fevers', see Curtin, *The Image of Africa*, esp. chapters 3, 7, 14; also Curtin, 'The White Man's Grave: Image and Reality, 1780–1850', *Journal of British Studies* 1, no. 1 (November 1961): 94–110.
- [29] 'Captain Weaver's Letter in Regard to the Colony', *African Repository and Colonial Journal* 7 (January 1832): 341; Delany, *Official Report of the Niger Valley Exploring Party* (New York: Thomas Hamilton, 1861), 28. For an analysis of Delany's travels, particularly his discourse of 'improvement', see Campbell, *Middle Passages*, 88–91. Both Delany and the various writers contributing to the *Repository* repeated the conventional – and completely uninformed – wisdom that conditions improved in the interior of the continent. 'All travellers agree in representing the elevated country of interior Africa as healthy', claimed one report, 'and this will in a few years be the dwelling place of civilized men. Men of color from the lower country of Virginia and North Carolina, and from all the more southern states, may settle in Monrovia, without apprehension.' 'Health of Liberia', *African Repository* 7 (July 1831), 158.
- [30] 'A Nation in the Midst of a Nation', in Blassingame, ed., *Douglass Papers*, Ser. 1, Vol. 2, 437; 'Liberia', *Frederick Douglass' Paper*, December 14, 1854; 'Liberian Colonization', *North Star*, September 8, 1848. The progress of the *Morgan Dix* was charted by the *African Repository*: 'Items from the Liberian Herald', 28, no. 4 (April 1852), 124; 'Latest Intelligence from Liberia', 28, no. 2 (August 1852), 226.

- [31] 'The Claims of the Negro Ethnologically Considered: An Address Delivered in Hudson, Ohio, On 12 July 1854', in *Douglass Papers*, Ser. 1, Vol. 2, 517, 520.
- [32] 'Pioneers in a Holy Cause', 75; on the 'foul blot', see David Brion Davis, *Inhuman Bondage: The Rise and Fall of Slavery in the New World* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2006), 102.
- [33] 'African Civilization Society', *Douglass' Monthly*, February 1859; Gates, *Wonders of the African World*, 7. On US involvement in the post-1808 Atlantic slave trade, see Gerald Horne, *The Deepest South: The United States, Brazil, and the African Slave Trade* (New York: New York University Press, 2007); Don Fehrenbacher, *The Slaveholding Republic: An Account of the United States Government's Relations to Slavery*, ed. Ward M. McAfee (New York: Oxford University Press, 2001).
- [34] John Beecham, *Ashantee and the Gold Coast: Being A Sketch of the History, Social State, and Superstitions of the Inhabitants of those Countries . . .* (London: John Mason, 1841), 196; John Smith, *Trade and Travels in the Gulph of Guinea . . .* 2 Vols. (London: Simpkin, Marshall, and Co., 1851), 83; Livingstone, *Missionary Travels*, 217.
- [35] 'The Colonization Scheme', *Frederick Douglass' Paper*, January 22, 1852 ('wilds'); 'The Witch-Doctor of the Kaffirs', *Frederick Douglass' Paper*, September 29, 1854.
- [36] *The Looking-Glass: Being a True Report and Narrative of the Life, Travels, and Labors of the Rev. Daniel H. Peterson . . .* (New York: Wright, 1854), 125; 'The Philomethean Society', *North Star*, February 8, 1848. On colonization, emigration, and the mission to Africa, see Sidbury, *Becoming African in America*, chap. 7.
- [37] 'African Civilization Society', *Douglass' Monthly*, February, 1859.
- [38] Daniel Hack, 'Close Reading at a Distance: The African Americanization of *Bleak House*', *Critical Inquiry* 34, no. 4 (Summer 2008), 729–53, argues not only that the decision to publish the novel 'was made with very limited knowledge of [its] contents', but that the knowledge of it that Douglass and his collaborator Julia Griffiths did have – the introduction of Mrs. Jellyby in the final chapter of the first published installment – makes this choice 'jarring', since Hack thinks that Douglass the cosmopolitan reformer would be offended by Dickens's case for prioritizing local and national needs. Considering Douglass' attitude to Africa and 'schemes' for its uplift, however, his decision to publish *Bleak House* makes perfect sense (quotations on 732, 733).
- [39] Douglass could only have been appalled by Harris's declaration that 'The desire and yearning of my soul is for an African nationality . . . I go to my country, – my chosen, my glorious Africa!' However, Douglass would have been held back by his friendship with Stowe and by awareness of the novel's efficacy at awakening anti-slavery sentiment in the hitherto apathetic North. Under pressure to repudiate Stowe's novel, Douglass said that he would not 'allow the sentiments put in the brief letter of George Harris . . . to vitiate forever Mrs. Stowe's power to do us good'. Harriet Beecher Stowe, *Uncle Tom's Cabin; A Tale of Life Among the Lowly* (London: George Routledge & Co., 1852), 463–4, 466; 'The Letter of Mr. Delany', *Frederick Douglass Paper*, May 6, 1853.
- [40] On Dickens and philanthropy, see Grace Moore, *Dickens and Empire: Discourses of Class, Race and Colonialism in the Works of Charles Dickens* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2004), 68–70; Bruce Robbins, 'Telescopic Philanthropy: Professionalism and Responsibility in *Bleak House*', in *Nation and Narration*, ed. Homi K. Bhabha (London: Routledge, 1990), 213–30; Frank Christianson, *Philanthropy in British and American Fiction: Dickens, Hawthorne, Eliot, and Howells* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2007), 75–103; Rodger L. Tarr, 'The 'Foreign Philanthropy Question' in *Bleak House: A Carlylean Influence*', *Studies in the Novel* 3 (1971): 275–83; Tarr, 'Foreign Philanthropy and the Thematic Art of *Bleak House*', *Dickens Studies Newsletter* 8 (1977): 100–4; and Ben W. Griffith Jr., 'Dickens the Philanthropist: An Unpublished Letter', *Nineteenth-Century Fiction* 12, no. 2 (September 1957): 160–3.
- [41] *Bleak House*, 26, 452; the 'hell-invented scheme of colonization', *North Star*, April 20, 1849.

- [42] *North Star*, May 11, 1849 ('benighted'). Brahma Chaudhuri, 'Dickens and the Women of England at Strafford House', *English Language Notes* 25, no. 4 (June 1988), 54–60 (quotes on 55).
- [43] Augustus Washington, 'Liberia as It Is, 1854', in *Liberian Dreams: Back-to-Africa Narratives from the 1850s*, ed. Wilson Jeremiah Moses (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1998), 207; *Frederick Douglass' Paper*, March 10, 1854.
- [44] Douglass on Delany quoted in Robert S. Levine, *Martin R. Delany: A Documentary Reader* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2003), 3; 'The Free Negro's Place is in America: An Address Delivered in Buffalo, New York, on 18 September 1851', in Blassingame, ed., *Douglass Papers*, Ser. 1, Vol. 2, 340.
- [45] Harper Twelvetrees, *The Story of the Life of John Anderson, the Fugitive Slave* (London: William Tweedie, 1863), 112; 'Country, Conscience, and the Anti-Slavery Cause: An Address Delivered in New York, New York, on 11 May 1847', in Blassingame, ed., *Douglass Papers*, Ser. 1, Vol. 2, 60 (Garrison quoted in note 1); 'American Slavery is America's Disgrace: An Address Delivered in Sheffield, England, on 25 March 1847', in Blassingame, ed., *Douglass Papers*, 11; 'Inhumanity of Slavery: Extract from a Lecture on Slavery, At Rochester, December 8, 1850', in *My Bondage and My Freedom*, 439. On abolitionists and nationalism, see McDaniel, *The Problem of Democracy*, chap. 5 (Garrison quoted on 127); on Douglass and nationalism, Oakes, *The Radical and the Republican*, 31–5; Eric J. Sundquist, *To Wake the Nations: Race in the Making of American Literature* (Cambridge: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1993), 83–92.
- [46] James A. Colaiaco, *Frederick Douglass and the Fourth of July* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007), 115–6; Oakes, *The Radical and the Republican*, 28–38; Blight, *Frederick Douglass' Civil War*, chap. 2.
- [47] 'Are We Ready for the Conflict?' *Frederick Douglass' Paper*, February 9, 1855 ('escutcheon'); Frederick Douglass to Horace Greeley, April 15, 1846, in *The Liberator*, June 26, 1846, in Philip S. Foner, ed., *Life and Writings of Frederick Douglass, Vol. 1: Early Years, 1817–1849* (New York: International Publishers, 1950), 148–9. On the Crummell–Douglass debate, see Wilson Jeremiah Moses, *Alexander Crummell: A Study of Civilization & Discontent* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1992), 139–40.
- [48] 'Persecution on Account of Faith, Persecution on Account of Color: An Address Delivered in Rochester, New York, on 26 January 1851', 302 ('products'); 'Henry Clay and Colonization Cant, Sophistry, and Falsehood: An Address Delivered in Rochester, New York, on 2 February 1851', 322 ('barbarism and darkness'), both in Blassingame, ed., *Douglass Papers*, Ser. 1, Vol. 2; 'Liberian Colonization', *North Star*, September 8, 1848 ('absurd and abominable').
- [49] 'Work and Elevation', in Blassingame, ed., *Douglass Papers*, Ser. 1, Vol. 2, 476. On Douglass' faith in American political institutions, see 'What to the Slave is the Fourth of July?' and 'The Dred Scott Decision: An Address Delivered, in Part, in New York, New York, in May 1857', in Blassingame, ed., *Douglass Papers*, Ser. 1, Vol. 2, 359–88; Vol. 3, 163–83 (esp. 174–82). Also Oakes, *The Radical and the Republican*, 31–4; Colaiaco, *Frederick Douglass and the Fourth of July*. Not surprisingly, Douglass' nationalism surged in the 1860s and early 1870s, when it appeared that the United States might actually wipe away slavery and racism. When it became apparent that the latter would be central to post-bellum national identity, Douglass became once again an American Jeremiah, readopting the critical nationalism of his antebellum days. Oakes, *The Radical and the Republican*, chap. 7; Blight, *Frederick Douglass' Civil War*, esp. chap. 10.
- [50] Daniel Walker Howe, 'American Victorianism as a Culture', *American Quarterly* 27, no. 5 (December 1975), 507–32; Howe, *What Hath God Wrought: The Transformation of America, 1815–1848* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2007), esp. chaps. 7 and 8. See also Richard L. Bushman, *The Refinement of America: Persons, Houses, Cities* (New York: Vintage, 1992).
- [51] Temperley, *White Dreams, Black Africa*, 105 (also 81–82); 'Henry Clay and Colonization', *Douglass Papers*, Ser. 1, Vol. 2, 322 ('influences'); 'Tribute for the Negro', *North Star*, April 7, 1849

- (‘improvement’); ‘African Colonization – The Other Side’, *Frederick Douglass’ Paper*, September 25, 1851. On Douglass as an Anglophile, see Elisa Tamarkin, *Anglophilia: Deference, Devotion, and Antebellum America* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2008), chap. 3.
- [52] Frederick Douglass Diary, February 11, 1887 (Joseph); February 19 (women); February 20 (Unitarian service); February 16 (negroes), Frederick Douglass Collection (Manuscript Division, Library of Congress, Washington, DC).
- [53] ‘Lessons of the Hour: An Address Delivered in Washington, D.C., on 9 January 1894’, in Blasingsame and McGivigan, eds., *Douglass Papers*, Ser. 1, Vol. 5, 592. On Douglass at the fair, see Christopher Robert Reed, *All the World is Here!: The Black Presence at White City* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2000), 167–8.
- [54] ‘Lessons of the Hour’, 597–8.
- [55] Yannielli, ‘George Thompson Among the Africans’, 1000.

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