
Navigating “The Storm, the Whirlwind, and the Earthquake”: Re-Assessing Frederick Douglass, the Orator

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“Without a day of formal schooling, he developed into a writer of vigorous prose and an orator whose sense of timing, mimicry, wit, and pathos was unexcelled even in the age of oratorical giants.”

— James McPherson (qtd. in Burke 27)

Biography historian James McPherson’s account of Frederick Douglass’ talents and gifts as an orator and public speaker are reflective of a larger cultural appreciation and respect for Douglass as one of the greatest and most powerful American rhetors. And yet, as John Louis Lucaites notes, given Douglass’ stellar reputation in the tradition of American public address, “it is striking that our bibliographies of nineteenth century public discourse generally fail to account for the rhetorical significance or complexities of [Douglass’] leadership and public speaking in anything but passing fashion” (49).¹ Lucaites further points out that although there has been a considerable amount of critical analyses of the rhetorical dimensions of Douglass’ three autobiographies and journalism, “on his oratory there is almost nothing” (49).² Although this dearth of critical analyses, coupled with Douglass’ reputation, is indeed curious, one possible reason for this lack of serious attention may stem from Douglass’ rhetoric being perceived merely as epideictic or ceremonial in nature.³

As Edwin Black notes, in the context of nineteenth-century public address, the oratory of African Americans has been judged by a primarily epideictic, aesthetic character since the “principal motif of African American discourse has necessarily been the subject of appearance—sheer physical appearance—and its fateful effects on public life” (“Aesthetics” 7). Douglass’ characterization as an epideictic orator may also be in part due to his fiery style and his tendency to appropriate epideictic

occasions for his oratory. At any rate, this reduction of Douglass' rhetoric to an epideictic or ceremonial function is limiting and no doubt has contributed to the lack of scholarship and critical inquiry surrounding his oratory. For in Aristotle's three classes of rhetoric, epideictic, in relation to deliberative or forensic discourse, is traditionally seen as less important or even frivolous, since the only true subject matter of discourse is the orator's skill and the audience plays no higher role than a speech taster or oratorical connoisseur (157). Given this definition, epideictic or ceremonial rhetoric, by nature, is more difficult to assess critically since it focuses not on the invention and arrangement of a speech but rather on the often intangible and sublime natural talent that characterizes the style and delivery of a particular orator.

An important first step in reclaiming Douglass' oratory as a meaningful site for rhetorical and cultural critique is to reject its relegation to the realm of mere display or ceremony. Even though there are several characteristics of Douglass' oratory that at first glance may be construed as epideictic or ceremonial, by closely examining Aristotle's conception of epideictic rhetoric in conjunction with a classic example of Douglass' oratory, his 1852 address, "What to the Slave is the Fourth of July?" we can see that Douglass' public address more accurately reflects a dramatic form of political or deliberate rhetoric—a rhetoric that deserves to be taken seriously, especially in its formation of a collective identity for African Americans within antebellum America and in its potential for current, interdisciplinary scholarship and pedagogical application.

The first step in challenging Douglass' reception as an epideictic orator is to understand fully Aristotle's original conception and definition of this third branch of rhetoric. In his *Rhetoric*, Aristotle outlines what he sees as the three divisions of oratory: political or deliberative, which "urges us either to do or not do something"; forensic, which "either attacks or defends somebody"; and the ceremonial or epideictic oratory of display, which "either praises or censures somebody or something" (157). Despite the differences in the three branches of oratory, Aristotle remarks that in all three divisions, the audience or "hearer" determines the speech's outcome. And, as noted earlier, Aristotle believed that the hearer must be a "judge" with a decision to make about the speech's content or message (as is the case for political and forensic oratory) or an "observer" of the orator's skill and talent (as is the case in epideictic oratory). Furthermore, Aristotle goes on to assert that only in the first two branches of oratory (forensic and deliberative) is the audience required to make decisions regarding the orator's character or ethos. As he notes:

Particularly in political oratory, but also in lawsuits [forensic oratory] it adds much to an orator's influence that his own character should look right and that he should be thought to entertain the right feelings towards his hearers; and also that his hearers themselves should be in just the right frame of mind. (161)

Aristotle's omission of the importance of the orator's ethos in epideictic discourse is crucial in how we evaluate and classify Douglass' public address. As James Jasinski notes, "ritual and epideictic discourse are commonly considered to be tools for promoting cultural continuity and social hegemony" (78). In other words, in most instances of epideictic discourse neither the subject matter nor the character of the orator is contested or questioned by the audience. The events and occasions for ceremonial oratory often include public celebrations and national holidays. That Douglass, as an orator, often appropriated such ceremonial occasions has led several scholars, including Jasinski and Maurice Charland, to place Douglass in the "subversive epideictic" tradition with abolitionists such as William Lloyd Garrison who regularly "appropriated Independence Day celebrations as part of his campaign for immediate abolition" (79).

And yet, unlike his white abolitionist counterparts who sought to identify and form anti-slavery alliances with their white, sympathetic audiences, Douglass chose to emphasize his separateness from his audiences and spoke to them, not as an equal, but as a dialogic other, thus breaking away from the epideictic (even the subversive brand) tradition by placing his ethos at the fore of his oratory. On several occasions in his Fourth of July orations, for example, Douglass deliberately distances himself from his audience in order to highlight the hypocritical institution of American democracy. Douglass clearly and passionately articulates to the crowd that this celebration over which he is presiding "is *yours* not *mine*" and he even goes so far as to ask his audience: "Do you mean, citizens, to mock me, by asking me to speak today? ... To drag a man in fetters into the grand illuminated temple of liberty and call upon him to join you in joyous anthems is inhuman mockery and sacrilegious irony" (1824). Douglass' passionate and controversial invectives seem outwardly political and deliberative and are certainly designed for more than mere "ceremonial display."

In addition to Douglass' ill fit with the ethical dimensions of epideictic discourse, there is another dilemma when considering Aristotle's notion of time in ceremonial rhetoric. In epideictic oratory, not only is there a pre-established affinity between the speaker and audience, but the speaker is "concerned with the present, since all men praise or blame in view of the state of things existing at the time" (157). In relation to his Fourth of July address, it is clear that Douglass is indeed "concerned with the present"; however, as Lucaites notes: "[t]o be an au-

thentic celebration of the Fourth of July, the speech must represent a dialogue between the nation's past on the one hand, and its present and future on the other" (58). In this task, Douglass confronts a serious problem. To speak in the present requires a legitimate, public voice; but it is precisely this legitimacy, as Douglass aimed to show, which the *present* enactment of the Constitution denied the African American community.

Douglass' inability to locate an identity for himself and his race within the context of white America is made clear in the Fourth of July oration; as he looks out at his white audience, he asks:

Fellow citizens, pardon me, allow me to ask, why am I called upon to speak here today? What have I, or those I represent, to do with your national independence? The blessings in which you, this day, rejoice are not enjoyed in common. The sunlight that brought life and healing to you has brought stripes and death to me.... (1824)

Again, Douglass' distancing himself from his audience and his open anger at being unable to locate a present identity for himself within the national celebration of Independence is thoroughly political. Instead of following the epideictic tradition of incorporating oratory to praise the current identity or character of a function or an individual, Douglass appropriates the political or deliberate tradition of critiquing the present to secure the future. As Robert Fanuzzi points out, by critiquing the present hypocrisy in America and by "introducing the problem of racial identity into the public scene of oratory, Douglass introduced the unthinkable—that is, the category of the subaltern—into the production of national identity" (13).

If there remains any doubt that Douglass' oratory transcends a merely ceremonial function, one need look no further than Douglass' admission in the oration: "My subject, then, fellow citizens, is AMERICAN SLAVERY. I shall see this day, and its popular characteristics from the slave's point of view" (1825). That Douglass chose and brings to the fore a controversial subject matter inherently contradicts epideictic discourse, where the only matter to be decided rests not in the content of the speech, but only in the speaker's talent or skill. Douglass, no doubt, utilized his subject matter to further problematize the establishment of a collective African American identity within the hypocrisy of American democracy. In the beginning of the speech, Douglass subtly alludes to the "distance" between the "platform" which he speaks and the "plantation" from which he escaped (1818). And yet, despite this distance, Douglass' announcement of his subject suggests that unless the reeking hypocrisy of democratic America is rectified,

"slavery" will remain *the* condition of African Americans, whether bound on a southern plantation or nominally free in the north.

Not only does Douglass' introduction of his subject matter transcend the limits of ceremonial discourse, his oratory is *more* political than similar anti-slavery speeches by his white contemporaries. The oratory of white abolitionists such as Garrison, Wendell Phillips, and William Bowditch better fits Jasinski's and Charland's label of "subversive epideictic." What makes the speeches of these white abolitionists more epideictic than political rests in the white orators' pro-slavery interpretation of the Constitution: an interpretation that Douglass vehemently rejected (Lucaites 55). Garrisonian abolitionists, despite their good intentions, made careers out of condemning what they saw as the inherent evil in the Constitution, a document Garrison denounced as a "covenant with the devil and agreement with hell" (54). Their pro-slavery interpretation of the Constitution left little political agency to their audience; short of radical measures such as disunion or secession, the Garrisonians presented citizens no practical remedies or solutions to slavery within the current framework of the Constitution. In this sense, the Garrisonians' oratory was more ceremonial than political: talented speakers would employ emotionally charged rhetoric to inform already sympathetic audiences of the inherent moral depravity at the core of the Constitution. In effect, Garrisonian addresses created ceremonies of anti-slavery affect and principle, but were superficial and apolitical in that the orators provided no immediate outlets to actively channel the very principles they championed.

Douglass, at one time a close ally with Garrison, became aware of this lack of agency and began to recognize the latent, if well-intentioned, racist paternalism that underscored the efforts of many white abolitionists. In 1849, after returning from a two-year speaking tour of the British Isles, Douglass broke away from Garrison and announced his full conversion to an anti-slavery interpretation of the Constitution, demanding that it be used "in behalf of emancipation" (Lucaites 55). As Lucaites notes, Douglass' public adoption of the anti-slavery interpretation of the Constitution has significant consequences for the collective identity of African Americans. Lucaites writes:

African Americans had long argued that American democracy was a hypocritical institution, but as long as the Constitution was a truly pro-slavery document, that hypocrisy was systemic and the weight of the charge could not be leveled at any particular individual. In an important sense, this stance absolved contemporary, white, northern abolitionists of any moral complicity in the nation's hypocrisy. (55)

The shift in Constitutional interpretation offered by Douglass established the political and social accountability so glaringly absent from the Garrisonian platform and made white abolitionists responsible for finding ways to make the nation live up to its legally constituted foundations. Yet, as can be seen in his Fourth of July address, Douglass was careful to lace his political call-to-action within the revolutionary and optimistic spirit he saw as the cornerstone of the Constitution and central to the nation's heritage: a heritage Douglass cleverly and explicitly linked to the "brave, wise fathers" of his predominantly white audience (1820). He goes on to assert angrily that a pro-slavery interpretation of the Constitution is "a slander upon their [the founding fathers'] memory. In order to uphold and honor the integrity of these "wise men," Douglass recommends to his listeners, what he calls a "plain reading" of the Constitution: "[L]et me ask . . . if the Constitution were intended to be, by its framers and adopters, a slave-holding instrument, why neither 'slavery,' 'slaveholder,' or 'slave' can be found in it" (1834). Douglass further notes that not only are there are no pro-slavery clauses in the Constitution, but "it will be found to contain principles and purposes entirely *hostile* to the existence of slavery" (1835; my emphasis).

Again, Douglass' anti-slavery interpretation of the Constitution does not allow him to follow in the "subversive epideictic" tradition of the Garrisonians—utilizing Fourth of July orations as a gesture to banish such Independence Day celebrations. James Jasinski is correct in noting that Douglass' public address "rearticulated the revolutionary heritage as an active commitment to more egalitarian principles" (44). Douglass understood that in order to truly remember the Revolution and follow in the footsteps of the revolutionary generation, Americans must continue to "work" and "labor" on behalf of its guiding principles. Douglass' belief in the emancipatory potential of the Constitution is made clear at the end of the oration. Immediately after recommending to his audience a "plain reading" of the Constitution, Douglass concludes:

Allow me to say, in conclusion, notwithstanding the dark picture I have this day presented of the state of the nation, I do not despair of this country. There are forces in operation, which must inevitably work the downfall of slavery.... I therefore leave off where I began, with *hope*. (1835)

Douglass' political rearticulation of the Constitution simultaneously places hope, optimism, and a heavy dose of responsibility squarely upon the shoulders of his audience. Instead of reading the Constitution as the final act of a conservative revolution, as many of Douglass' audience members did at the time, or reading the document in the Garrisonian tradition as a "covenant with death" or "agree-

ment with hell," Douglass offers a happy medium between these two extremes: a reading of the Constitution as the first act of a *continuing* revolution.

At this point, it is clear that any effort to analyze Douglass' rhetoric or critically assess his intentions and effects as an orator involves a clear understanding of his relationship with his white audiences. Understanding this relationship is especially crucial in resurrecting Douglass from his very limited reputation and subsequent dismissal as an epideictic orator in the bibliographies of nineteenth century public discourse. This examination of the subjects and ideology which both informed and constituted the content of Douglass' Fourth of July address would be incomplete without addressing Douglass' style and delivery, the two rhetorical canons most associated with epideictic discourse and the two canons in which Douglass exhibited the most mastery.

In terms of Douglass' style, Ronald Burke notes that it was a product of the Romantic Age: "a time when public discourse appealed to the emotions by its imaginative and heroic qualities to reflect the age's overwhelming spirit, westward expansion, concern over the problem of slavery, and impulse towards social reform" (23). Howard Martin further notes that the typical style of the nineteenth-century orator also reflected the Romantic Age in its ornamentation and affect; it included "frequent apostrophe, a self-conscious concern for rhythm, stereotyped imagery, and exaggerated sentimentality" (qtd. in Burke 24). This sentimental turn can be seen at the end of the Fourth of July address where Douglass tempers his politically charged message by concluding with poetic prose that celebrates the unseen "forces in operation" which will aid Americans in ending slavery:

The far off and most fabulous Pacific rolls in grandeur at our feet. The Celestial Empire, the mystery of ages is being solved. The fiat of the Almighty, "Let there be Light," has not yet spent its force. No abuse . . . can now hide itself from the all-pervading light. (1836)

The sentimentality is further heightened when Douglass, somewhat ironically given his ideological split from Garrison, closes his speech by asking "every heart to join in" to recite Garrison's sermonic poem "The Triumph of Freedom" (1836-37).

Douglass' Romantic style, while perhaps partly responsible for his reputation as a ceremonial orator, was not nearly as important in cementing this reputation as was his knack for delivery. By all accounts, Douglass was a master of this fifth rhetorical canon, defined by Cicero as "the control of voice and body adapted to the importance of the material and language" (qtd. in Burke 24). In regard to his voice, Benjamin Quarles remarks that Douglass had a full baritone and a "euphonious voice that was created for public address in pre-microphone America" (qtd. in Burke 24). Also, due to his careful study of Caleb Bingham's instructional book

The Columbian Orator, Douglass, as a slave, learned the finer points of vocalization including varying the cadence of sentences, repeating key words naturally and distinctly, and avoiding monotony (25).

However, Douglass' exceptional talents in style and vocal delivery, as important as they were, are not enough to explain why the political significance of Douglass' oratory, as Lucaites notes, has historically been dismissed or mentioned in little more than passing fashion by rhetorical scholars and historians of public address. For other orators of the time who were also masters of style and delivery, such as Daniel Webster and William Lloyd Garrison, have not received such limited, apolitical treatment. To understand Douglass' dismissal, one must contextualize his oratory within the stylistic aesthetic that informs the principle motif of African American discourse: "the subject of appearance—sheer physical appearance – and its fateful effects on public life" (Black, "Aesthetics" 9). In an exceptional essay which offers a rare look at the bodily perception of black orators by white audiences in nineteenth-century America, Robert Fanuzzi notes that although reportage of Douglass' lectures "often neglected the content of his speeches, they rarely neglected the dimensions of his body" (1). Armed with the privileges of spectatorship, white audiences seemed to train their "racial gaze" on the physique of the black orator and to enjoy the public spectacle (1). The spectacle of Douglass is clearly illustrated in the following quotation from Thomas Wentworth Higginson. Asked to recount a recent oration by Douglass, Higginson noted:

And then there would perhaps come some man stumbling with his heavy gait upon the platform, walking as if a hundred pounds of . . . chains were appended to each heel, and that man afterward, under the influence of freedom, developed into the superb stature and the distinguished bearing of Frederick Douglass. (qtd. in Fanuzzi 1)

On the surface, it would seem that the reception of Douglass as a public spectacle would have subverted his political intent by situating the audience members in the epideictic function as *observers*, not judges.⁴ Yet, Douglass was keenly aware of his public perception as a black orator and used this position to his advantage⁵; he saw the conventions of oratory as an occasion to reproduce racial inequality on a public stage in a public form. Douglass was able visually to reproduce this inequality because the grammar and accuracy of his sentences and the appropriateness of his elocution and gesticulation conformed, as Robert Fanuzzi points out, with a white, male, republican regimen "that made the physical comportment of the orator the only statement of a moral nature" (8).

Douglass had so well mastered his art, in fact, that some of his detractors questioned whether or not he had ever been a slave. The nature of the African, critics

assumed, was inferior and immoral; the nature of the black slave was further degraded by his oppression in America. Even Nathaniel Rogers, who had called Douglass the "Roman Coriolanus," could not believe how "such manly and lofty developments as he, could have taken place under that unspeakable system [of slavery]" (qtd. in Fanuzzi 8). Audience members' discomfort with Douglass seems to indicate that while producing the body of a white male orator, the emblematic national figure, Douglass was leading his audiences beyond the discursive boundaries of their own collective identities. As Fanuzzi notes, "The dislocated state of the black orator's body, possessing neither the nature of the African slave nor the "lighter complexion" of the American orators, thus became the grounds for challenging his fellow Americans' entitlements to citizenship" (12).

It is clear from his Fourth of July address that Douglass enjoyed reminding his audiences that they had not met the standards of citizenship as easily as they had assumed and furthermore that their nature was just as big a mystery as his was. Douglass eagerly points out the hypocrisy of his white audience as he states: "Americans, your republican politics, not less than your republican religion, are flagrantly inconsistent.... The existence of slavery in this country brands your republicanism as a sham, your humanity as a base pretense, and your Christianity as a lie" (1833). Fanuzzi remarks that "in repeating the common rules [or hypocrisy] of citizenship for the benefit of his audiences, Douglass told them what they did not know. In articulating these rules through his body, he translated the national language of citizenship into the untranslatable fact of race" (13).

Some scholars, such as John Louis Lucaites, feel that Douglass' appropriation of the white, male, bourgeois ideal to construct and complicate an African American identity turned out to be ironic in ways that perhaps Douglass did not entirely foresee. Lucaites notes that while Douglass created "an ideological space from within which the American slave could legitimately speak ... he simultaneously invited the institutionalization of what W.E.B. DuBois would later call the 'double-consciousness' of the American Negro; two souls, two thoughts, two unreconciled strivings; two warring ideals in one dark body" (64). However, critics must remember that prior to Douglass, there were virtually no attempts by black Americans to legitimize the presence of a unique African American identity. Furthermore, as Fanuzzi illustrates, it was precisely *because* Douglass was aware of his own "double-consciousness" that he was able to utilize this "two-ness" as a rhetorical device to deconstruct the white, republican, citizenship of his audience, thus normalizing the marginal and nationalizing the position of the other.

By now, it should be evident that despite the often epideictic reception of Douglass by his audiences and the ceremonial occasions on which he spoke,

Douglass' intent and constructed relationship with his audience was indeed political or deliberative. However, given the emphasis placed upon his style and delivery, Douglass' oratory can perhaps best be classified as deliberate rhetoric in the dramatic form. In his book *Rhetorical Questions: Studies of Public Discourse*, Edwin Black notes that "the simplest possible distinction between dramatic and narrative form is between showing and telling"; furthermore, "narrative (telling) becomes drama (showing) at the point at which the credibility of the narrator becomes a salient issue to the auditor" (151). Although Black does not apply his analysis of the narrative and dramatic form to either nineteenth-century or African American discourse, his examination of the two forms are helpful in better understanding and re-classifying the oratory of Douglass.

Black notes that "the dominance of deliberative discourse by narrative form is part of our [nation's] past; given this, one reason Douglass' rhetoric may not so readily appear to meet the criterion for deliberative or political oratory is because it does not fit the category of narrative form. Black explains that in narrative form, the credibility of the orator is not a principle issue and the delivery is simple and unadorned. He writes, "To the extent that the narrator appears to be a neutral conduit, relying in grammatically simple, declarative sentences the narrator's uninterrupted observations, the auditor is left relatively free to construct a response" (155). Clearly, given his race and politically charged message, utilizing an unadorned style and serving as a "neutral conduit" were not options for Douglass. Furthermore, as illustrated in the Fourth of July address, Douglass not only makes his credibility an issue, but he brings it to the fore in the opening of his speech. He humbly acknowledges to his audience, "[t]he distance between this platform and the slave plantation from which I escaped is considerable" (1818). With an air of self-deprecation, he goes on to note his lack of skill and preparation, asking for the audience's "patience and generous indulgence" (1818). Although Douglass' subsequent eloquence and fiery delivery shed an ironic light on these opening remarks, the question of Douglass' credibility and character being an issue in his oratory is undeniable.

Perhaps Douglass' classification as a ceremonial orator can be better understood given his utilization of the dramatic form, a form that "can cast the auditor into a relationship with the discourse that we ordinarily associate with epideictic occasions" (Black, *Rhetorical* 148). For in the dramatic form, as in epideictic rhetoric, the oration is not the medium through which a tale is transmitted; rather, "the tale is the medium for the transmission of its teller's moral portrait" (149). Before explaining how Douglass mastered this component of the dramatic form, it is important to emphasize that the dramatic is indeed a rhetorical *form*, not a genre

such as forensic, political, or epideictic. And even though the dramatic form may align itself or more naturally lend itself to the epideictic genre, it can be utilized in all three classes of rhetoric. Douglass was a rare master of the form in the deliberate genre because he was able to channel his political message through his own "moral portrait." His predilection for the dramatic form may in part have stemmed from his boyhood training from *The Columbian Orator*. As Fanuzzi points out, "the operative word in the oratorical education of handbooks like *The Columbian Orator* was 'conformity': the perfect alignment of speech and physique which was in turn designed to harmonize the orator with the argument and the moral provisions of the address" (5). In particular, *The Columbian Orator* instructed students to strive for "the suitable conformity of the motions of the countenance, and several parts of the body in speaking, to the subject matter of discourse" (5). As Black notes, unlike the narrative form which is concerned only with rhetorical *discourses*, the dramatic form is concerned with the whole of the rhetorical *transaction* including "the gesture, the facial expression, even the inert object" (*Rhetorical* 156).

Since Douglass consciously utilized his presence as the "other" as a pedagogical tool and reference point in his oratory, it was crucial that he, and his audience, viewed his addresses not merely as narrations, but as transactions. To reiterate, Douglass enacted the elite presence of the classically trained white rhetorician and accepted the premise of republican oratory only to articulate a national identity for himself and his race in ways his audience would not have expected. His imposing presence, not merely his discourse, was what he wished his audience to receive; for in his Fourth of July address he makes it clear that the power of language alone is not enough to remedy the evils of American slavery:

Oh! had I the ability, and could reach the nation's ear, I would today pour out a fiery stream of biting ridicule, blasting reproach, withering sarcasm, and stern rebuke. For it is not light that is needed, but fire; it is not the gentle shower, but thunder. We need the storm, the whirlwind, and the earthquake. (1826)

Here, metaphor seems to serve as the basis for Douglass' self-presentation; his opposing presence, no doubt, was felt as "the storm, the whirlwind, and the earthquake." In this example, Douglass almost surpasses the realm of dramatic oratory into that of the sublime—a rhetorical form, as characterized by the ancient rhetorician Longinus, that uses "elevated language, not to persuade audiences, but to entrance them" (99). Longinus praises the few oratorical geniuses who are able to utilize the sublime style, contending that "the extent to which we can be persuaded is usually under our own control, but sublimity exerts irresistible force and mastery and gets the upper hand with every hearer...[and] what transports us with wonder is more telling than what merely persuades or gratifies us" (100).

That Douglass was able to achieve sublimity seems evident when considering the following review of one of his addresses by a reporter for the abolitionist newspaper *The Herald of Freedom*: “It was not what you would call eloquence or oratory. It was sterner, darker, deeper than these. It was the volcanic outbreak of human nature, long pent up in slavery and at last bursting its imprisonment” (qtd. in Jay 265). In the modern world, sublimity is often associated with grandiloquence and with epideictic discourse at its worst. As Black points out, “grandiloquence is less a symptom of passionate conviction than a flush of fevered ambition, and furthermore, the style generally has no organic connection with its content” (“Aesthetic” 7). Yet, Douglass had a rare gift as an orator in that he was able to combine the dramatic, almost subliminal, style with a clear political mission. The reporter from *The Herald of Freedom*, after describing Douglass’ transfixing eloquence notes, however, that Douglass “was not up as a speaker—performing. He was an insurgent slave taking hold on the right of speech and charging on the tyrants the bondage of his race” (qtd. in Jay 265). Undoubtedly, Douglass was passionately committed to his subject matter and was able to use his conviction and elevated style to further “harmonize” or solidify the connection between himself and his message.

Edwin Black contends that there are few orators today who can, like Daniel Webster and Frederick Douglass, successfully infuse the dramatic form into deliberative discourse, and even fewer audiences who can assimilate this type of discourse (*Rhetorical* 157). Black remarks that “since the decline and discrediting of the elocutionary movement, rhetorical critics have been exceedingly reluctant to apply aesthetic values to public discourse” (“Aesthetics” 1). That the aesthetic stylistic has, as Black notes, “fallen out of favor,” may in part explain the seeming disinterest among scholars in critically analyzing Douglass’ oratory. However, Black is right in speculating that perhaps the “rejection of aesthetic elocutionary values has been too indiscriminating” (1). For, if Black is correct in assuming that “sheer physical appearance” has traditionally been the principal motif for African American discourse, then by refusing to acknowledge the aesthetic value of public discourse, the very foundation of an already marginalized rhetoric is ignored and undermined.

Furthermore, it is important to note that this stylistic aesthetic, especially the dramatic form just outlined, cannot be understood through the study of an orator’s literary works. To illustrate this point, one has to look no further than to the situation of Douglass. Early on in his speaking career, Garrisonian abolitionists, fearing a white backlash against Douglass, encouraged him to “stick to a simple narrative style, avoid abstract pronouncements, and pepper his eloquence with a *little*

of the plantation manner of speech" (Jay 263). Douglass, however, refused and, as mentioned earlier, the linguistic power and complexity of his speeches prompted doubts about his claim to being an ex-slave. This doubt, as Gregory Jay points out, subsequently resulted in the writing of his autobiography—an effort to authenticate his origins. Although there have been several critical and rhetorical studies of Douglass' literary works, it is not possible to transfer such criticism to his oratory or gain a complete portrait of Douglass simply by analyzing his autobiography. For, as Jay notes, given the suspicion produced by his public addresses,

The often-praised 'simplicity' of the *Narrative* [Douglass' autobiography] and its concentration on 'personal' experience are thus the result of political and rhetorical decisions and the pressures of the historical situation, not the spontaneous outburst of an untutored soul or the product of an unmediated 'realism.'
(266)

Any attempt to resurrect oratorical texts from the past or to re-engage in the critical analysis of public address must be placed within the current academic climate of such efforts. As Robert Hariman rightfully points out, "oratory has experienced a precipitous decline during the past century," and any efforts to study its past are "dogged with the suspicion that attention to the art of oratory is merely an antiquarian request" (163). There has seemingly been little exigency among scholars in the 20th century to study "great speeches" of the past. When confronted with such critical investigations of oratory, Hariman notes, we are plagued with the question: "What value is there in studying oratory when that knowledge is not likely to contribute to actual practice? More specifically, why study great speeches when no one is interested in imitating their artistry?" (163). Surely, given America's ever-changing rhetorical tastes, it isn't likely that speechwriters today would look to the overtly sentimental oratory and artistry of Daniel Webster or even necessarily to the dramatic, almost subliminal, stylings of Douglass.

Hariman suggests that public address, to have meaning and relevancy to scholars, must be assessed more in terms of content than style. For example, Hariman implies the interdisciplinary potential for engaging in the critical analysis of oratory when he notes that the history of public address can identify and resolve problems of historical interpretation that are themselves the result of an insufficient understanding of the role of public talk in the political culture of the period. In particular, he notes the problem of historians in tracing the influence of civic republicanism in American political culture.

Although scholarship on republicanism has been characterized by unusual attention to popular rhetorical practices such as pamphleteering and oratory, the tendency has been to use those texts to locate the doctrine rather than to under-

stand the doctrine as it was being filled out rhetorically through textual performance. (165)

It seems that Douglass' oratory—particularly his “What to the Slave is the Fourth of July?”—is a perfect example of an address which enacts the performance of civic republicanism since Douglass appropriates the style, delivery, and identity of white republicanism to simultaneously deconstruct this social construct while fashioning a new collective identity for African Americans. Hariman notes that if abstract historical ideals such as republicanism, equality, and democracy can be understood as “a performative, sensibly coalescing around a repertoire of inventional strategies,” the lack of coherence surrounding these subjects and their seemingly incompatible doctrines cease to be problematic (165).

However, even if the historical significance of oratory becomes validated along the lines that Hariman suggests, questions of immediate cultural significance remain a problem, especially to those scholars who are teachers. In addressing this issue of oratory and pedagogy, an insightful article by Patricia Bizzell from the field of Rhetoric and Composition engages some meaningful possibilities for oratorical study in the composition classroom. The focus over the last thirty years or so in this relatively young discipline has been the desire to theorize, and therefore legitimize, the teaching of writing in the academy. Although Rhetoric and Composition still may not be a highly recognized or respected field and is still too often situated in the proverbial (and sometimes literal) basement of English departments, the field has, however, become professionalized: the discipline now offers graduate degrees, produces scholarly journals, and offers tenure-track professorships.

However, as Bizzell implies, an unfortunate side effect of this professionalization is that composition teachers, eager to place the byproduct of theory and legitimization—the writing process model—at the heart of their courses, have become more invested in “what students do, not what they know” (56). Bizzell elaborates on this predilection for technique and form over content:

When we discuss what students are writing about, usually we look at content only in terms of how it contributes to the elaboration of structure or style – to note, for example, that a writer has given good evidence for her position, or illustrated his account with vivid anecdotes. (44)

This privileging of “doing” over “knowing” in many ways does injustice to the cultural studies focus at the heart of so many composition courses and to those of us in the field, it diminishes our role as rhetoricians—a role Bizzell feels can be recaptured through the introduction of oratory and “great speeches” into our curriculum. Given the growing diversity in America, she notes that if we are to take our role as rhetoricians seriously and become dedicated to fostering public dis-

course, then we need to teach students the following principle: “That in order to build a relationship with an audience, they will have to know not only the dominant culture, but also at least some of the other diverse, important cultures that make up the American mix” (56). To teach this principle, Bizzell sees great promise in studying the public addresses of minority speakers such as Douglass and Native American orator, William Apess. For, as Bizzell notes, orators such as Douglass were so successful in effecting social change because they were able to utilize their knowledge of the dominant culture to build a rhetorical bridge between their audience and their own culture and political agenda. Even though these nineteenth-century texts are not current, introducing them to students is important; especially for those from disenfranchised or marginalized groups; “[i]t is exciting, Bizzell argues, to see that the full tradition of contributions by people from their communities is being granted the respect due to efforts sustained over time with some success” (58).

Bizzell is optimistic that the lessons from these historical orations will carry over into productive class discussions of contemporary social issues. She contends that such discussions can be “much less easily reduced to ‘I believe, you believe,’ or shouting matches—if placed in appropriate historical contexts and focused on rhetorical strategies” (58). As a fellow rhetorician and composition teacher, I see promise in Bizzell’s application of historical oration; for it’s important to help students find cultural commonalities on which collective action can be based and to make sure as many diverse voices get heard in the discussion as possible.

In concluding his “Afterword” to *Rhetoric and Political Culture in the 19th Century*, Robert Hariman articulates the need to “relocate” the art of public address: “this relocating referring to both a process of discovery where one finds what has been misplaced, and a process of transference, where someone moves something from one place to another” (179). I’d like to believe that my exploration and re-classification of Frederick Douglass’ oratory addresses both these components of “re-location.” By closely examining Douglass’ oratory, in addition to his writings, one can garner a more accurate, historical portrait of this dynamic American leader and social reformer. Also, given the growing diversity of the American public, there is a continued necessity to interpret and determine the terms of the nation’s collective existence. For this task, Douglass’ oratory provides a useful and hopeful model in proving that all citizens must be guaranteed an equal voice in the nation’s dialogue *without* being forced to sacrifice the legitimacy of their difference in the bargain. ✱

Notes

¹ In a footnote supporting his claim, Lucaites notes, “There are a few exceptions to the larger claim that Douglass’s public speaking has been ignored, but they do not mitigate the larger point that relatively little attention has been focused on the relationship between the rhetorical forms and functions of his public speaking situated within particular historical contexts” (67).

² My research supports Lucaites’ claim here. I was able to locate over 22 texts that engaged the rhetorical dimensions of Douglass’ literary works and journalism, but only six (all of which I address in this project) which directly engaged in critical analysis of his oratory. For consideration of the rhetorical dimensions of his narratives, albeit with a literary focus, see Bloom, Sundquist, and Andrews.

³ See Pitney, Getsch and Hurm, Jasinski, and Charland. It’s somewhat ironic that these last two essays, which reduce Douglass’ oratory to an epideictic function, appear in a collection titled *Rhetoric and Political Culture in the Nineteenth Century*.

⁴ William Lloyd Garrison’s description of Douglass as “an ornament to his society and a blessing to his race” helped to solidify Douglass’ being received as “spectacle” (qtd. in Bizzell, *The Rhetorical Tradition* 1185).

⁵ Douglass’ awareness of his audiences’ “racial gaze” and his reception as spectacle is evident in his description of his early speaking career: “I was generally introduced as a chattel—a thing—a piece of southern property—the chairman assuring the audience that it could speak” (qtd. in Bizzell, *The Rhetorical Tradition* 1186).

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