

"A New Vocation before Me": Frederick Douglass's Post-Civil War Lyceum Career."

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In first edition of his 1881 autobiography *Life and Times*, Frederick Douglass reminisced about the vocational dilemma he faced after the conclusion of the Civil War sixteen years earlier: "I felt I had reached the end of the noblest and best part of my life, my school was broken up, my church disbanded, and the beloved congregation dispersed, never to come together again. The anti-slavery platform had performed its work, and my voice was no longer needed. 'Othello's occupation was gone'"¹ (Douglass, 2013 [1881], p. 292). This essay will examine Douglass's struggle to resolve the existential crisis that he faced in the decade from 1865 to 1875. Douglass's vocational problems during that decade were compounded by a pressing need for revenue, not just to support himself, but to assist his four adult children and their growing families financially. While a proficient journalist and author of two well-received autobiographies before the Civil War, it had been as a highly skilled orator on behalf of the abolitionist cause that Douglass had gained the greatest fame. (Blight, 1991, 2, 4-5) It is not surprising, therefore, that Douglass would turn to paid public speaking on the lyceum stage to reinvent himself professionally. This essay will explore Douglass's career as a lyceum speaker and conclude that the lessons he learned in the first post-Civil War decade had a significant impact on both the rhetorical content and delivery style of Douglass's oratory in the final twenty years of his life (1875-1895).

Novice Orator

To trace this evolution one must briefly analyze Douglass's antebellum speaking career. An eastern shore of Maryland slave, born in 1818, Douglass had lived for much of his youth in Baltimore where he acquired rudimentary literacy through nearly legendary effort. His most

treasured possession as a young man was a copy of Caleb Bingham's *The Columbian Orator* from which he gleaned lessons in effective rhetoric that he followed for decades to come. (Colaiaco, 2006, pp. 27-28; Deacon, pp. 71-73) Bingham provided very practical advice on subjects such as speech delivery, pacing, gestures, eye contact, employment of humor, concluding with the exhortation that the best way to become an effective orator was "practice and imitation of the best examples." (Lampe, 1998, 9-13)

After escaping to the North in 1838, Douglass settled in New Bedford, where he accepted any work he could find on the city docks to support a growing young family. In 1841, Douglass took an uncustomary vacation and traveled with New Bedford abolitionists to Nantucket Island attend a convention of the Massachusetts auxiliary of the American Anti-Slavery Society, led by Boston editor William Lloyd Garrison.² Before he left Nantucket, Douglass had been hired as a paid itinerant antislavery lecturer by these Garrisonian abolitionists.

In the next few years Douglass addressed audiences large and small across the Northeast. The Garrisonians encouraged him to retain his original focus in recounting his personal experiences under slavery. As one advised: "Be yourself...and tell your story.... Better have a little of the plantation manner of speech than not; 'tis not best that you seem too learned." Douglass ignored this advice, declaring "It was impossible for me to repeat the same story month after month, and to keep up my interest in it...it was a task altogether mechanical for my nature" (Douglass, 2003 [1855], pp. 207-08). A trip to Great Britain following the publication of his first autobiography in 1845 provided opportunities to Douglass to address many new subjects, including temperance and religion. After he returned home in 1847 Douglas actively participated in debates at numerous antislavery conventions and black meetings.

Douglass took mastering the art of oratory very seriously. He already possessed enormous natural gifts as a speaker: a tall imposing physical presence and a baritone voice with a great carrying power. He could modulate his voice from a whisper to a thunderous blast and presented his arguments with a calculated rhythm. Reading and re-reading Caleb Bingham's introduction, "General Instructions for Speaking" (Bingham, 1811, pp. 7-30). Douglass imbibed the principles of effective rhetoric from classical ages down to his present times. In particular his oratory displayed all three of the Aristolian means of persuasion: ethos, logos, and pathos. He also adapted the homiletic style of black slave preachers and was an apt student of the great abolitionist and political speakers of his age: Wendell Phillips, Charles Sumner, Theodore Parker, Edward Everett, and Daniel Webster.

Contemporaries acknowledged that Douglass was one of the most effective speakers on the antislavery stage. For example, New Hampshire abolitionist editor Nathaniel P. Rogers declared that "As a speaker he [Douglass] has few equals.... He has wit, argument, sarcasm, pathos—all that first-rate men show in their master efforts. His voice is melodious and rich, and his enunciation quite elegant" (Ernest, 2014, 21-220). Black abolitionist William J. Wilson praised Douglass's natural abilities: "In his very look—his gesture—in his whole manner, there is so much of genuine, earnest eloquence, that they leave no room for reflection. Now you are reminded of one rushing down some fearful steep, bidding you follow; now on some delightful stream, still beckoning you onward" (Wilson, 1854, pp. 165-73).

The end of the Civil War and especially the passage of the Thirteenth Amendment created a crisis for veteran abolitionists like Douglass. Some of them such as Garrison favored declaring their movement a success, closing down the American Anti-Slavery Society and retiring from reform. Douglass did not agree with these colleagues' rosy assessment of the

security of gains won by African Americans through emancipation and struggled to keep the abolitionist movement in existence until the passage of additional constitutional amendments to expand the rights of the freed people. Ratification of the Fourteenth Amendment, acknowledging African American citizenship, and the Fifteenth, granting Black males voting rights, however, were soon forthcoming. The Society finally disbanded in 1870, provoking Douglass's "career crisis" (Barnes, 2013, 103-04; McFeely, 1991, 269, 273).

Douglass also experienced a demoralizing string of financial reverses in the decade 1865-1875. His final journalistic venture, the Washington (D.C.) *New National Era*, allowed him to work alongside two of his three sons from September 1870 to October 1874 in attempting to influence federal Reconstruction policies, but ultimately that newspaper proved a financial disaster. In June 1872 Douglass's Rochester home burned to the ground, probably the target of arson, causing the loss of valuable bearer bonds. Douglass's brief service as president of the Freedman's Savings and Trust Bank in 1874 proved unable to save that institution from financial collapse or himself from the loss of thousands in his own deposits. (Barnes, 2013, 109-10, 113-14; McFeely, 1991, 273, 282-86, 297) Finally, adding to Douglass's financial burdens was his four adult children's lack of success in their own careers. The responsibility of caring for a growing extended family forced Douglass to search for a new source of revenue. (Barnes, 2013, 107-09; McFeely, 1991, 257-58, 261, 271, 297)

Fortunately Douglass did not have to wait long before an alternative career opened itself to him. In his third autobiography he recounts that in the years following the Civil War his vocational problem "was soon decided for me. I had after all acquired (a very unusual thing) a little more knowledge and aptitude fitting me for the new condition of things than I knew, and had a deeper hold upon public attention than I had supposed." Douglass reported in *Life and*

Times that “Invitations poured in upon me from colleges, lyceums, and literary societies,” offering him generous compensation for a single lecture “Here, then, was a new vocation before me, full of advantages, mentally and pecunarily. When in the employment of the American Anti-Slavery Society, my salary was about four hundred and fifty dollars a year, and I felt I was well paid for my services; but I could now make from fifty to a hundred dollars a night...” (Douglass, 2013 [1881], 1:293-94).

Douglass and the Lyceum Circuit

The American lyceum had come of age in the 1830s and 1840s, initially in the Northeastern states and then spreading westward. Local committees, dominated by ministers, educators, and businessmen, had arranged programs of lectures deemed “instructive” and morally uplifting. Most of its early speakers were ministers, lawyers, or teachers already experienced in public presentations. Only a small cadre of star performers such as Ralph Waldo Emerson, Henry Ward Beecher, and Wendell Phillips delivered large numbers of lectures or drew high fees before the Civil War (McKivigan, 2008, 119; Ray, 2002, 627-29).

After the disruption of that great national conflict, the lyceum industry underwent an enormous transformation. Beginning in the Midwest many lyceums and literary societies began coordinating the schedules of leading itinerant performers. Soon “empresarios” such as former abolitionist James Redpath launched lecture bureaus to represent those star performers and guarantee them plentiful bookings, top salaries, and coherent traveling schedules in exchange for a standard ten percent commission. The goal of Redpath’s bureau, according to one scholar, was to create a professional business structure for the lyceum industry that “would be ethical and equitable for the performers and the local committees” (McKivigan, 2008, 119-20; Ray, 2002, 627-29).

There was a considerable expansion in opportunities after 1865 for the would-be professional lecturer. However, most lyceums concentrated their “seasons” in the winter months from November to April. A speaker had to be willing to travel considerable distance over uncomfortable and often unreliable transportation to pick up available “dates.” Many lecturers also learned that some lyceum societies and individual promoters would fail to pay the agreed-upon fees when audiences failed to appear. For example in 1869, Douglass traveled from Rochester to Frederick, Maryland, to deliver a lecture and discovered that all of the arrangements he had made via a series of telegrams were with a fictitious individual and no such event had been scheduled (*Baltimore American and Commercial Advertiser*, 1869). After that fiasco Douglass proved an easy recruit by Redpath to his growing stable of star lyceum performers (Redpath, 1869).

Douglass set off to make lecturing pay by doggedly crisscrossing the North from the late fall to early spring. For example, Douglass first delivered a brand new lecture in Brooklyn on 17 December 1866, then spoke in many eastern cities and town, and finally traveled as far west as Missouri, Iowa, and Minnesota before returning to his Rochester home in March (Blassingame and McKivigan, 1991, p. 149). Surviving correspondence with his children reveal that Douglass maintained an arduous pace of travel for weeks at a time while lecturing, alleviated by occasional visits at the homes of old friends from antislavery days (Douglass, C., 1870, 1872, 1873). In November 1872, for example, Douglass confided in his daughter Rosetta that “But for the burning and destruction of my hard earnings, I should be able to spare myself the coming winter from the labors, perils and fatigue of a lecturing campaign” (Quarles, 1948, p. 313).

Douglass on the Lyceum Stage

One thing that made it easier for Douglass to turn to the paid lyceum stage to support himself and his family was his occasional pre-war experience in delivering carefully prepared written lectures in public. His iconic 1852 “What to the Slave is the Fourth of July?” might have been the earliest of this type of address by Douglass³ (Colaiaco, 2006, 29). Two year later he accepted an invitation to deliver the heavily-researched lecture “Ethnology,” as part of the commencement ceremonies at Western Reserve College in Cleveland. Dr. Henry L. Wayland from the faculty of the University of Rochester lent Douglass many scientific works and Douglass recalled laboring “many days and nights” on this speech (Douglass, 2003 [1855], p. 498). In the late 1850s, Douglass had prepared and occasionally delivered two other newly written lectures, “Self-Made Men” and “Picture & Progress,”⁴ before lyceum audiences.

In the decade from 1865 to 1875 when Douglass made the lyceum stage his primary source of income, he prepared and repeatedly delivered a relatively small collection of addresses. The occasionally varying titles of these lectures were “Sources of Danger to the Republic,” “William the Silent,” “Our Composite Nationality,” “Self-Made Men,” “Santo Domingo,” “Recollections of Our Anti-Slavery Conflict” and “The Races.” Douglass later observed that “the success of a lecturer depends more upon the quality of his stock in store, than the amount” (Douglass, 2013 [1881], 1:294) and he frequently reworked his manuscripts of existing lectures rather than adding more to his repertoire. All of these meticulously researched addresses were designed to display Douglass’s erudition to audiences attuned to the traditions of the lyceum’s “instructive” lecture (Douglass, 2013 [1881], 1:294). An examination of the content of Douglass’s new lyceum lectures also reveals that they contained significant political subtexts. Regardless of the titular subject matter, they all addressed important political and racial topics of the Reconstruction era to a significant degree. (Ray, 2002, 628-29) Douglass was striving to

combine the reformist aspirations of his old abolitionist vocation with the professional requirements of his new career on the lyceum circuit. For example, “The Races” was an adaptation of Douglass’s original address on Ethnology before the Western Reserve College. In the latter lyceum presentation, Douglass shifted the talk’s emphasis from a description of the scientific debate over “polygenesis” to an attack on popularly-held anti-Black prejudices.⁵ In his 1854 lecture, Douglass had attempted to demonstrate his mastery of the complex scientific debate over Race. On the lyceum stage, Douglass dismissed the so-called scientific claims of the “Ethnologist” perfunctorily and instead appealed to the “common sense” of his listeners to recognize the self-evident capacities of the African American. Douglass attributed any lack of “cultivation” by African Americans after the Civil War to the abiding legacy of slavery. Douglass’s lecture presented a challenge to the assumption of white supremacy held by many of his listeners but encouraged them to see the former slaves as their fellow citizens entitled to the national legacy of “freedom,” “liberty,” and shared humanity (Ray, 2002, 630-33).

The other antebellum lecture that Douglass continued to deliver to lyceum audiences after the Civil War, and in fact into the 1890s, was his “Self-Made Men” address. The title was the adaption of the popular aphorism about the exceptional opportunity for economic and political advancement afforded to Americans and had been used by many lecturers and authors including Ralph Waldo Emerson, Horace Greeley, and Harriet Beecher Stowe before Douglass first presented his version of the lecture in the late 1850s. Called for far more often by lyceum committees than “Races,” Douglass’s “Self-Made Men,” appealed to what Douglass scholar Waldo Martin dubs as the nineteenth century’s “dominant middle-class uplift ideology” (Douglass, 2013 [1881], p. 294; Martin, 1984, pp. 262-63). In its long history of deliveries, Douglass regularly tailored this lecture to his audiences, white and black, foreign and American.

In the period under examination here, the decade following the Civil War, Douglass worked to make the lecture relevant to the on-going public debates over guaranteeing opportunities to the freedpeople. Douglass gave attention in the lecture to the careers of successful people of African descent, to some relatively well-known such as the mathematician Benjamin Bannecker, to international figures like Haitian revolutionary Toussaint L'Ouverture, and to more obscure individuals such as New York inventor and architect William Dietz. In this lecture, Whites had their prejudices challenged regarding African American inferiority and Blacks would hear of models of achievement by persons like themselves. While the self-help ideology had an implicit individualistic and laissez-faire bias, Douglass also enlightened his audience to the government-imposed obstacles that freed slaves faced to experience "fair play" He asserted that the recently freed people "should be measured, not by the heights others have obtained, but from the depths from which he has come. For any adjustment of the scale of comparison, fair play demands that to the barbarism from which the negro started shall be added two hundred years heavy with human bondage." (Blassingame and McKivigan, 1992, pp. 545-72).

A brand new lecture that Douglass developed for the winter of 1866-67 lyceum season was entitled "Sources of Danger to the Republic." He had just written a thoughtful article for the *Atlantic Monthly* on the problems Reconstruction posed for the nation. Douglass expanded his negative appraisal of the new president Andrew Johnson into a radical critique of the U.S. Constitution and its frustrating system of checks and balances. Aware that his assessment might offend those in his lyceum audiences use to "Fourth of July extravagances about the Constitution and about its framers," Douglass began his lecture by acknowledging his while "my early condition in life was not very favorable to the growth of what men call patriotism and reverence for institution...I can speak respectfully of the Constitution." He next praised the Constitution as

“free from bigotry, free from superstition, free from sectarian prejudices, casts or political distinction.” Nevertheless, Douglass argued, the Constitution as “wise and good as that instrument is...is simply a human contrivance.... Time and experience and the ever increasing light of reason are constantly making manifest ...defects and imperfections, and it is for us, living eighty years after them, and therefore eighty years wiser than they, to remove those defects—to improve the character of our constitution at this point where we find those defects” (Blassingame and McKivigan, 1991, pp. 152-54).

For example, Douglass argued that consent by the U.S. Senate was not an adequate safeguard against abuse of the president’s appointing power because the president may make appointments when the Senate is not in session. Douglass contended that the Supreme Court would check congressional arbitrariness more equitably than does the president with his power of veto. He criticized the provision for a second presidential term on the ground that it allows the president to break with the party that elected him originally. Douglass even questioned whether the United States government would function better with no president at all. Finally Douglass concluded the lecture by calling on his audience to remember the contribution of African American soldiers to suppressing the rebellion and saving the Constitution. While a bloody conflict had been required to remove the earlier “sources of danger” to the nation, Douglass hoped that these new dangers could be exposed and removed “without the aid of a second rebellion—without the people being lashed and stung into another military necessity” (Jarrett, 2011, pp. 59-60; Blassingame and McKivigan, 1991, pp. 149-72, 593-94).

Of course, Douglass did not express these opinions in a vacuum, but in the climate of heated political quarrels over Reconstruction policy that would within a year lead to an unsuccessful attempt to remove Andrew Johnson from the White House. His lecture even delved

into a conspiracy theory that the assassins of Lincoln had intimate knowledge of Johnson and his intention of restoring the former Confederates to their dominance in both the southern state governments and the national governments. Not coincidentally, Douglass dropped this lecture from his repertoire when Grant succeeded Johnson in the White House and his attitude toward the executive branch brightened (Blassingame and McKivigan, 1991, 169-70).

In 1872 and 1873 Douglass delivered another lyceum address “Santo Domingo” that mixed scholarly research in the style of the instructive lecture and political topicality in line with his reformist inclinations. In 1871 President Grant had appointed Douglass as assistant secretary to accompany a commission sent to the Dominican Republic to assess public sentiment regarding the proposed annexation to the United States. The annexation question deeply divided the Republican Party as such prominent leaders as Charles Sumner and Carl Schurz maneuvered to defeat Grant’s proposed treaty. In his written-out lecture, Douglass presented a detailed historical, geographic, botanical, and economic account of the island nation. He contended that “No country is more bountifully blessed by nature or more woefully cursed by man” (Blassingame and McKivigan, 1991, 345). Douglass praised the Santo Domingo’s “wonderful and easily assessable tropical resources, her splendid bays, and fertile valleys.” He affirmed that the vast majority of the Dominican people favored annexation to the United States “to put an end to revolutions and secure peace and prosperity.... They want Saxon and Protestant civilization. They have tried the Latin and Catholic rule, let them have a chance to try free thought and free religious opinions” (Blassingame and McKivigan, 1991, 354).

Many historians have criticized Douglass’s support for Grant’s plan to annex the Dominican Republic as an endorsement of United States imperialism or a crass attempt to win a patronage appointment by demonstrating loyalty to the president (Martin, 1984, 86-92; McFeely,

1991, 276-77). A close examination of the text of Douglass's "Santo Domingo" lecture delivering repeatedly in 1872-73, however, supports a different interpretation. As literary scholar Robert Levine argues, "Santo Domingo" lecture should be viewed in the context of the early 1870s, when Douglass still believed that Reconstruction's promise of a multiracial democracy could be achieved. Denying charges that the mixed blooded peoples of the tropical climes were incapable of higher civilization, Douglass called for annexation: "Let us lift them up to our high standards of nationality" (Blassingame and McKivigan, 1991, 355; Levine, 2008, 200-16). Douglass advocated annexation to be quickly followed by admission of the state of Santo Domingo to add political power to the antiracist side in the Reconstruction political battles.

In the winter 1869-70 lecturing season, Douglass assiduously researched and wrote the address "Our Composite Nationality" for its inaugural delivery as part of Boston's prestigious Parker Fraternity lecture series and then departed on a tour from Vermont to Illinois speaking more than forty times in the next three months. Douglass selected his topic in response to a growing national debate regarding the admittance of immigrants from China. Beginning his lecture by surveying the past treatment of Native Americans and African Americans, Douglass warned that "heretofore, the policy of our government has been governed by race pride, rather than by wisdom." He argued that the "question of Chinese immigration should be settled upon higher principles than those of a cold and selfish expediency. There are such things in the world as human rights. They rest upon no conventional foundation, but are eternal, universal and indestructible." Shifting from human rights to patriotism, Douglass next claimed that the nation's "greatness and grandeur will be found in the faithful application of the principle of perfect civil equality to the peoples of all races and of all creeds."

Douglass argued that the “only wise policy” toward newly arrived immigrants, including those from China often under attack on the West Coast, was to extend “a liberal and brotherly welcome to all who are likely to come to the United States.” Douglass advocated extending citizenship to “all nations, kindreds, tongues and peoples” as soon as “they learn our language and comprehend the duties of citizenship.” Douglass’s lecture expressed an early version of what historian Waldo Martin labels a “melting-pot dynamic” by which all peoples and cultures would assimilate into a superior new American culture freed on racist and ethnic prejudices. In the context of the Reconstruction era, Douglass certainly realized that advocating a policy of tolerance toward a new race of immigrants would promote fairer treatment of his own (Blassingame and McKivigan, 1991, 245, 252-53; Martin, 1984; 217-24; Levine, 2008, 213-24; Ray, 2002, 639).

One of the least characteristic topics for a lyceum lecture by Douglass was his “William the Silent” address, prepared for his winter 1868-69 lecturing tour. Its subject was the life of the sixteenth-century leader of the Dutch revolt against Spanish suzerainty. In preparing the written text for the lecture, Douglass had relied heavily upon the multivolume *History of the Dutch Republic* (New York, 1856) by John Lothrop Motley. That work applauded William and the Dutch people for their courageous uprising against foreign domination and religious persecution and viewed them as the direct precursors of George Washington and the American revolutionaries of two centuries hence.

Douglass stressed that William’s noblest service was to ignore self-interest in order to champion political independence and religious tolerance. He doubted if even the taciturn President Grant better understood the uses of silence as William had. Douglass explained how William earned his sobriquet “the Silent”: he heard kings Henry of France and Phillip of Spain

plot to annihilate the Protestants but kept silent until conditions were propitious for intervention eight years later. Douglass pointed out the irony of William's sobriquet in view of his stature as one of the most eloquent speakers and writer of his time. Douglass regarded William's talents for silence more remarkable than his wealth, royal friends, or knowledge of seven languages⁶ (Blassingame and McKivigan, 1991, pp. 187-99, 614-16).

To make this esoteric historical topic more relevant to his mid-nineteenth century listeners, Douglass compared William briefly with fellow revolutionaries George Washington and Toussaint L'Ouverture, but primarily with the recently assassinated Abraham Lincoln. He recalled that Lincoln desired to be identified with the people and observed that William and Lincoln were implicitly trusted by the people they each served. He observed that William was a more "thorough-going reformer" who often led in advance of Dutch public opinion, but acknowledged that Lincoln "waited for the people, and he desired to know not only what could be done, but what the people required to be done." William had lived in a "monarchical age" but in modern democratic times, Douglass contended, "he is a true statesman that takes the law from the lips of the people.... Individuals may be very great, but the masses of men are greater. The great heart of the people may be mistaken, but it is always honest and disinterested." Comparing William and Lincoln in their attitude toward their enemies, Douglass observed "The secret power of both men can be found in this very element of their character, in their charity, in their love for their fellow-men, even though these fellow-men were erring and criminal" (Blassingame and McKivigan, 1991, p. 197. 198).

"The everlasting negro"

One thing that is clear from the content of Douglass's post-Civil War lyceum lectures is that in all of them he intentionally raised the issue of race. During one delivery of "Self-Made

Men,” Douglass stated in a serio-comic way that ‘he had hoped to be able to get through with one lecture without bringing in the everlasting negro—but no—go where he would, and speak on what subject he might, he always had to lug in the negro’ (Ernest, 2014, 128).⁷ Douglass made a similar statement about audience expectations to his manager James Redpath: “It is too late now to do much to improve my relation to the public. I shall never get beyond Fredk. Douglass the self educated slave “(Douglass, 1871). Although frequently quoted by Douglass scholars, there is strong reason to believe Douglass had no real desire to reject his public persona as an emancipated slave and leading champion of African American civil rights.

To the contrary, Douglass viewed his post-Civil War lyceum performances as an extension of his earlier role as an advocate for his race. As Douglass explained in *Life and Times*: “I never rise to speak before an American audience without something of the feeling that my failure or success will bring blame or benefit to my whole race⁸ (Douglass, 2013 [1881], 1:294-95; Martin, 1985, 629). As communications scholar Angela G. Ray has observed, Douglass both “employed the conventions of popular lecturing and popular entertainment” while he also “challenged the white supremacist society in which he and his audiences lived” (Ray, 2002, 626). For example, the conscientious preparation that Douglass devoted to each lecture revealed that he intended to use his polished and confident stage appearances to display the intellectual capacities of his recently emancipated race. Experientially Douglass used his presence before largely white audiences as a means to confront and possibly overcome racial prejudices. In his “Self-Made Man” lecture, for example, audiences could not fail to recognize the similarity between Douglass and many of his subjects. (Ray, 2002, 637, 629).

The central arguments of Douglass’s lyceum lectures similarly addressed the debate over race during Reconstruction. He repeatedly denied that any current lack of “cultivation” among

African Americans was due to inherent inferiority but rather was attributable to the influence of slavery, “a poor school for the human intellect and heart” (Douglass, 1999 [1845], p. 4). In both “Races” and “Our Composite Nationality,” Douglass advocated destroying all forms of racial hierarchies as an expansion of basic American ideals of “freedom” cherished by his audiences (Ray, 2002, 633). In “Self-Made Men,” Douglass endorsed the self-improvement ethos held by his white auditors while simultaneously challenging those individuals to realize that slavery and racism had erected barriers against African Americans striving to advance themselves. (Martin, 1985, 67) When defending Chinese immigrants in his “Our Composite Nationality” lecture, Douglass envisioned a future that assimilated all cultures, including his own. In that last lecture, Ray notes, Douglass pulled off the significant rhetorical feat of endorsing American exceptionalism while redefining American greatness as a product of its incorporation of diverse cultures from around the world. (Ray, 2002, 626, 640). In all his lyceum lectures, Ray argues, “Douglass both enacted and argues for social change that did not merely adapt African Americans to the norms of a fixed white American culture but rather challenged cultural fixedness itself, promoting an ‘American’ culture encompassing differences, in which biological variation did not determine cultural hierarchies” (Ray, 2002, 640, 626).

The Changing Lyceum Stage

While Douglass strove to deliver his own version of politically-informed “instructive” lectures after the Civil War, the character of the American lyceum was undergoing fundamental change. The commercialization of the post-war lyceum industry by managers like James Redpath was accompanied by a significant shift in the content and delivery style of many of its lectures. Redpath noted that after the Civil War there was a decline of the audience for many lyceum veterans while he could attract full houses for “humorists” and other less serious “entertainers.”

With a few exceptions like Beecher, ministers were losing their audience by delivering lectures “not in a democratic but in a theocratic...style.” “Literary men,” Redpath declared, “write for the eye not the ear; the literary and oratorical styles out to be different....” (McKivigan, 2008, 131) A veteran reformer, himself, with many friends in the ranks of antislavery, women rights, and temperance activists, Redpath worked to help them adapt to new public tastes. Redpath did not mourn the decline of the old-style “instructive” lecture because he believed that “the penny press has called up thousands of brilliant writers to do that duty. The penny press killed all mere essay-reading in public. In order to be heard, a lecturer now, must not only have something to say but know how to say it; he must not be a mere humdrum reader of a manuscript but a magnetic orator who can kindle thought and entrance his audience” (McKivigan, 2008, 131).

Douglass was aware that the rapid changes in the lyceum industry. In an 1871 letter to Redpath, Douglass acknowledged the growing demand of lyceum audiences to be entertained as well as educated: “I shall endeavor not to forget that people—do not attend lectures to hear Statesmanlike addresses, which are usually rather heavy for the Stomachs of young and old who listen. People do not attend lectures to hear statesmanlike addresses, which are usually rather heavy for the stomachs of the young and old who listen. People want to be amused as well as instructed. They come as often for the former as the latter, and perhaps as often to see the man as for either” (Douglass, 1871; Ray, 2008, p. 629).

One tool Douglass was able to bring with him from his antebellum career as an abolitionist speaker was his ability to interject various forms of humors into his speaking. The best student of Douglass’s humor, Granville Ganter documents his astute employment of a full range of mimicry, burlesque, satire, and irony to advance his rhetorical arguments. Much of Douglass’s humor on the lyceum stage played on his racial distance from much of his audience,

winning laughter from a largely white St. Louis audience by describing himself “as a democrat, a genuine democrat dyed in the wool” (St. Louis *Democrat*, 1867).⁹ In Cincinnati, he won laughter during a “William the Silent” performance, by endorsing the election of African Americans to Congress: “I am sure if the nigger is tough enough to stand Congress, Congress ought to stand him” (Cincinnati *Commercial*, 1869). In an Illinois delivery of “Self-Made Men” Douglass drew greater laughter by mocking the persistent disparagement of his race by describing two Irishmen discussing his lecture: “And faith! Pat, what did ye think of the nager?” “Nager? Did ye say he was a nager?” “Arrah, he’s half nager any way.” “Be jabbers if half a nager can do like that I should like to know what a whole nager could do!” (Ernest, 128).¹⁰ Ganter observes that Douglass fully exploited comedy’s subversive potential in his lecturing: “At his best, Douglass could win his enemies; admiration by making them smile with him” (Ganter, p. 535).

Audiences and Critics

In the post-Civil War decade, newspapers recorded widely disparate audience reactions and described Douglass’s manner of delivery in sharply contrasting ways: he could be characterized as unanimated or engrossing; audience were merely polite and turnout very low, or audience size and financial returns were unprecedentedly large for a given location or lecture series. One auditor in Mt. Pleasant, Iowa, declared that Douglass’s words “were uttered with a power and chasteness of style and diction that *shook down* prejudice from many who had heard, but until now did not believe.” A “Quiet Listener” in Boston, however, criticized Douglass “in true friendship,” point out that “when he instituted comparisons between English governmental forms and practices and our own, he made mistakes that the [New York] World newspaper will rejoice over as samples of negro incapacity to grapple with profound issues.” A Syracuse newspaper reporter observed about Douglass delivering “William the Silent”: “He does not

appear to the same advantage with a carefully prepared lecture, that he does when speaking from the impulses of his heart without note or manuscript” (Blassingame and McKivigan, 1991, pp. 149, 240, 342; Blassingame, 1979, p. lxvi).

Those who had observed Douglass as a public orator for many years often offered harsh judgments on his performance on the post-Civil War lyceum stage. One long-time Black associate in the antislavery cause, William Wells Brown, regretted the change in Douglass speaking style, noting that: “His latter addresses from manuscripts, however, do not, in our opinion, come up to his extemporaneous efforts” (Brown, 1874, pp. 435-40). Another long-time Douglass acquaintance from Rochester, the journalist Jane Marsh Parker, also pronounced a negative assessment of Douglass written lectures: “He never became a student, even when the victory of his cause had been won, and he had the leisure for study. Composition was never easy for him, unless his soul was stirred in its depths; nor was public speaking, unless his tongues was on fire. His literary lectures upon subjects foreign to his personal experience were highly disappointing. ‘The Honourable Frederick Douglass’ was never the orator that ‘Fred Douglass’ had been in the old pre-emancipation days” (Marsh, 1895, 552-53).

James M. Gregory, a Howard University professor and Douglass’s first biographer, came to a similar assessment of the latter phase of Douglass’s oratory: “Mr Douglass, as an extemporaneous speaker, was much more impressive than he has been since he began to write out his speeches and deliver them from manuscript.... By not being confined to his manuscript, he caught the inspiration of his audience. This inspiration, so essential to true eloquence in the orator, can never be secured by the essayist, however finished and perfect he may be” (Gregory, 1893, 93).

Douglass realized the problems in his manner of his delivery of lyceum lectures. In the past, Douglass reported, “Written orations that not been in my line. I had usually depended upon my unsystematized knowledge, and the inspiration of the hour and the occasion, but I had now got the ‘scholar bee in my bonnet’” (Douglass, 2013 [1881], 1:294). Douglass learned that a “carefully studied and written address,” like his “the Races of man,” “fell dead at my feet” (Douglass, 2013 [1881], 1:294). Douglass once admitted to Gregory that he thought he had made a mistake in this writing out of his lectures: “he imbibed the idea that his extemporaneous speeches would be defective and subject him to criticism. He had by so doing lost much power in delivery. ‘For,’ said he, ‘I never was a good reader.’” During one unsuccessful lecture, Douglass apologized to his listeners for his “lack of animation,” stating that since “the death of slavery,” he had nobody and nothing to “pitch into.” He added that he “read up” on such lecture subjects as “William the Silent” only because the public “insisted on hearing him”¹¹ (Ray, 2002, 629).

To try to counter these problems Douglass adapted his lecture presentations in several significant ways. Douglass learned that adding some extemporaneous remarks could save a standard lecture from boring his audience. For many years, for example, Douglass reminisced that he “adhered pretty closely to my old lecture on “Self-made Men,” retouching and shading it a little from time to time as occasion seemed to require” (Douglass, 2013 [1881], 1:294). He also adapted by departing frequently from his announced topic to discuss issues of the day, especially the deteriorating state on Southern Reconstruction.¹² Douglass frequently coupled speaking engagements in the same city in order to present both one of his lyceum lectures and an address on current political concerns, often to essentially the same audiences. Douglass also learned to ingratiate himself with his audiences and hold their attention by revealing some of the inside workings of the lyceum industry and the foibles of its “stars” (Ray, 2002, p. 629).

Douglass similarly adopted a rhetorical pose of humility at the beginning of his lyceum lectures to win his listeners' sympathy, such as the self-deprecatory statement to a Boston audience that it was a great "distance from the plantation to the platform of Music Hall" (Boston Commonwealth, 1860). Douglass's efforts apparently had the desired effect because lyceum empresario James Redpath praised Douglass as the only African American lecturer capable of drawing in large white audiences (St. Louis *Democrat*, 1875).

Despite Douglass's dissatisfaction with reaching his lyceum audiences, he was unable to escape the financial pressures of having to support much of his extended family and therefore returned each winter to the grueling routine of the lecture circuit (Diedrich, 1999, 297). This problem finally was solved when Douglass accepted a series of lucrative federal appointments following the election of first Rutherford B. Hayes and then James Garfield, Republicans for whom he had vigorously stumped. While Douglass continued to lecture occasionally, he returned his platform emphasis to speaking on civil rights questions as well as stump speaking for Republican candidates he favored. A few older lyceum talks such as "Self-Made Men" survived in Douglass's repertoire for special occasions, but most of the others were retired with few indications of regret.

This decade of lecturing would prove an important bridge to the latter style of Douglass public speaking, featuring such well-known addresses as the "The Freedmen's Monument to Abraham Lincoln," "The Philosophy of Reform," "The Southern Exodus," and especially "Lessons of the Hour." One of Douglass's strongest critics of his lyceum lectures, James M. Gregory conceded the superiority of these latter written lectures in several ways. "He was led to investigate more extensively the subjects on which he wrote, and to take more time for preparation; and thus made his speeches more complete." Gregory concluded: "Since he

followed the practice of writing his speeches his style has become more argumentative and massive, similar to that of Webster and Burke. In all he says, like these great masters, whom none have surpassed, there is so much beauty of expression, elegance of diction, dignity of thought, and elevation of moral feeling that the most happy and lasting effect is produced in the mind of the reader”¹³ (Gregory, 1993, 95). Charles Waddell Chesnutt, another early Douglass biographer, agreed: “What Douglass platform utterance in later years lacked of the vehemence and fire of his earlier speeches, they made up in wisdom and mature judgment“(Chesnutt, 117). Those great addresses of Douglass’s last twenty years were the products of considerable research and preparation. Douglass consciously wrote them down with the intention that they would be published and read by a much broader audience than heard him deliver them. Despite Douglass many natural talents as an speaker, these monuments of oratory probably would not have been possible without the frustrating lessons that he had learned in that decade in the lyceum circuit in the first post-Civil War decade.¹⁴

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¹ After reminiscing about his youthful career in Baltimore as caulker, he continued: “My public life and labors had unfitted me for the pursuits of my earlier years, and yet not prepared me for more congenial and higher employment. Outside the question of slavery my thoughts had not been much directed, and I could hardly hope to make myself useful in any other cause than that to which I had given the best twenty-five years of my life. A man in the situation I found myself, has not only to divest himself of the old, which is never easily done, but to adjust himself to the new, which is still more difficult.” (Douglass, 2013 [1881], p. 292).

² When Douglass had concluded his novice abolitionist address, Garrison had declared: “that PATRICK HENRY, of revolutionary fame, never made a speech more eloquent than the one we have just listened to from the lips of that hunted fugitive.” (Douglass, 1999 [1845], p. 4). Also see a similar judgment by abolitionist Samuel J. May. (Ernest, 2014, p. 41).

³ Douglass wrote his friend Gerrit Smith “I have been engaged in writing a Speech for the 4th July which has taken up much of my extra time for the last two or three weeks” (Douglass, 1852).

⁴ Historians John Stauffer, Zoe Trodd, and Celeste-Marie Bernier incorrectly date “Picture and Progress” to late 1864-early 1865, but press reports survive confirming its delivery in fall 1861. (Stauffer, Trodd, and Bernier, 161-73; Blassingame, 1985, pp. 452-73, 619-20).

⁵ Douglass established his credentials on the subject by subtly reminding his audience through a third-party reference to himself the speaker as a former slave. (Ray, 2002, p. 630)

⁶ At least one delivery provoked controversy, when an Ohio priest accused Douglass of taunting Catholics in the audience about the alleged role of Pope Gregory XIII in the assassination of William. (Blassingame and McKivigan, 1991, pp. 614-16).

⁷ In a delivery of his William the Silent lecture a Cincinnati newspaper reported that Douglass attracted laughter from his audience with the comment “You see, my friends, I may announce what subject I please, but I have never been able to ascend an American platform, and get off without bringing the nigger with me in some shape or other.” (Blassingame and McKivigan, 1991, 193).

⁸ Douglass also demanded that halls where he performed drop their restrictions on African American attendance. (Ray, 2002, 629).

⁹ Robert Fanuzzi has best analyzed Douglass’s self-conscious use in his rhetoric of the racial distance between himself and his listeners. (Fanuzzi, 1999, pp. 12-13).

¹⁰ Granville Ganter compares Douglass use of such hostile stereotypes favorably with that done by his contemporaries Elizabeth Cady Stanton and Susan B. Anthony by observing that “Douglass’s use of ethnic slurs was performed in the service of a universally egalitarian political philosophy.” (Ganter, 2003, p. 542).

¹¹ In 1875 Douglass justified his choice of a lecture topic that year based on his recollection of the lack of success with the “William the Silent” address (Ray, 2002, 629).

¹² For example, Douglass had planned to deliver his “The Recollections of the Anti-Slavery Conflict” lecture in Louisville, Kentucky, on 23 April 1873, but abandoned that subject to address recent reports of a massacre of Black Republicans in Colfax, Louisiana (Blassingame and McKivigan, 1991, 360-61).

¹³ It is significant that Gregory said Douglass’s “reader” not listener (Ernest, 2014, 161-62).

¹⁴ These latter lectures also might reveal Douglass returning to the models of his childhood, the classical and British addresses he read in Bingham’s *Columbian Orator* for his evolved style of argument (Mailloux, 2002, 102-10, 110; Walker, 2002, 93).