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Frederick Douglass's Prophecies of Abolition: World Literature and the Black Romantic Man of Letters

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ABSTRACT

Frederick Douglass's citations of British Romantic poets have recently attracted the attention of scholars working in two modes of Black Studies: transatlantic literary history and political theory. In this essay, I take as my point of departure that Douglass's Romanticism indicates his self-conception as a "man of letters" and his participation in the emergent discourse of "world literature." I show how Douglass reconceived these notions as modes of abolitionist practice. I contend that Douglass explored the generic variety of Romantic literature, and especially sought to exercise its prophetic capacity to address slavery. From the historical vantage of world literature, Douglass formulates a theory of abolition as structurally necessary to the function of liberalism. I conclude by suggesting that this premise helps contextualize the return of abolitionism in contemporary conversations about mass incarceration and police violence.

On 1 February 2017, at an event marking the first day of Black History Month, President Donald Trump made some strange remarks about the nineteenth-century abolitionist and intellectual Frederick Douglass. Listing the people one might learn about at the newly opened National Museum of African American History and Culture, Trump declared, "Frederick Douglass is an example of somebody who's done an amazing job and who's getting recognized more and more" (Lopez). Media observers leapt at the president's suggestion that Douglass was still alive. At that time, in the second week of the administration, the question of Trump's ignorance still held some interest. White House Press Secretary Sean Spicer repeated the syntactic-historical error when questioned about it the next day: "He wants to highlight the contributions that he has made, and I think through a lot of the actions and statements that he's going to make, I think the contributions of Frederick Douglass will become more and more" (Lopez). Spicer's garbled misattributions speak the willful historical blindness of the revanchist conservatism of which Trump is only the latest and most grotesque expression.

From a certain angle, however, Trump was not necessarily wrong: the rise of scholarship on chattel slavery and African American literature over the past few decades has in fact meant that Douglass and his contemporaries are "getting recognized more and more." The grudging, stumbling truth of Trump's mistake speaks both to the success of liberal

multicultural politics of recognition and to the myriad ways in which the legacy of slavery haunts late capitalism in the US. Citations of Douglass by activists and intellectuals engaged in contemporary political struggles suggest he anticipated these developments in his prophetic rhetoric. In what follows, I show how Douglass explicitly conceived his prophecies through readings in European Romanticism, especially as represented by canonical male writers like Robert Burns, Thomas Carlyle, and Victor Hugo.

Literary historians have lately begun to take a different perspective on early African American writers' engagements with Romanticism. Where once the appearance of Romantic tropes in early African American writing proved its derivativeness, research has begun to explore the role of Romantic notions in the coalescence of African American literature around the middle of the nineteenth century.¹ Two of the most important recent trends in Black Studies have taken off from the connection between early African American writers and Romantic authors on both sides of the Atlantic. In the first place, the field has seen a scholarly turn toward comparative, transnational literary and cultural history; in the second place, it has begun to insist that we take canonical African American writers seriously as thinkers, theorists, and philosophers.²

Drawing on both of these trends here, I submit that the Romantic notion of "world literature" led Douglass to a double conception of himself as a "man of letters," one time-bound and engaged in the politics of his day, the other trans-historical and canonical. The notion of world literature had recently come into focus in English around the figure of Lord Byron and then later more reflectively in Thomas Carlyle, both of whom Douglass appears to have read carefully.³ I argue that Douglass performed the role of a man of letters as a fugitive from slavery in service to the cause of abolition, and in so doing, expanded the imaginative range of abolitionism beyond the historical frame of the antebellum United States. To make this case, I proceed by first examining a few key instances, drawn from his long career as a writer, in which Douglass situates himself within and alongside white Romantic traditions. I show how Douglass articulated his practice as writer in relation to the generic variety of literature as circulated through the print culture of the period. I suggest the prophetic character of his work has to do with its movement between autobiography and more philosophical consideration of liberalism as such. I demonstrate how this particularly literary aspect of Douglass's work both abets and complicates recent attempts to read him as a political theorist. I pay special attention to Douglass's late lecture on "Self-Made Men," for the ways it draws on Romantic writers to reckon with chattel slavery as a figure of cultural memory and a historical fact. By way of conclusion, I return to the question of Douglass's recognition in the contemporary and show how the prophetic dimensions of his work have led to his central place in conversations about the abolition of mass incarceration and police violence.⁴

Douglass and Romanticism

The later years of Douglass's life saw a number of attempts to link him to Romanticism. Douglass and his sympathetic contemporaries sought to shore up his legacy through reference to the Romantic cultural logics of the day. This project sometimes took the simple form of reading his life as a "romance." At the outset of an 1892 interview, the well-known Black journalist T. Thomas Fortune of the *New York Age* cues readers to Douglass's quasi-mythic character:

Few names in American history are surrounded with more of the romance that delights the youthful and instructs the old than that of this man, born a slave on the eastern shore of Maryland three quarters of a century ago. He has been the center of every vicissitude. (qtd. in Douglass, *Frederick Douglass Papers* [hereafter *FDP*], ser. 1, 5: 498)

Fortune finds in Douglass's life a generic pattern: the movement from humble beginnings to world-historical events. His recognizability is an effect of both his unique individuality and his conformity to historical typology. Echoing Fortune in the introduction to the last version of Douglass's autobiography, *The Life and Times of Frederick Douglass* (1893), George L. Ruffin claims, "Douglass' life has been a romance—and a fragrance—to the age" (*Autobiographies* 468). In both of these formulations, the definition of "romance" slips between the narrative shape of his life and his reputation. It suggests that a kind of aesthetic attraction draws Douglass, his readers, and "the age" together.⁵

The narrative form of romance, however, hardly accounts for Douglass's sophistication as a writer and thinker. Fortune and Ruffin both focus on the question of Douglass's reading to draw the ideological aspects of his work into sharper relief. Ruffin writes:

Douglass' rank as a writer is high, and justly so ... His written productions, in finish, compare favorably with the written productions of our most cultivated writers. His style comes partly, no doubt, from his long and constant practice, but the true source is his clear mind, which is well stored by a close acquaintance with the best authors. His range of reading has been wide and extensive. He has been a hard student. In every sense of the word, he is a self-made man. By dint of hard study he has educated himself, and to-day it may be said he has a well-trained intellect. He has surmounted the disadvantage of not having a university education, by application and well-directed effort. (470–71)

Ruffin subtly connects Douglass's erudition to his acquisition of literacy in slavery, as "a hard student." He also makes a case for Douglass's canonicity on the basis that he "compare[s] favorably with the written productions of our most cultivated writers." The first person plural possessive leaves ambiguous whether Ruffin means national or world literature, but Douglass consistently attributed transformations in his thinking to reading and travelling abroad. The 1893 autobiography recounts in detail three major trips to Europe, the first from 1845 to 1847, a second from 1859 to 1860, and the last from 1886 to 1887.⁶ The world-historical dimensions of his life, and his status as a "self-made man," are thus not merely physical, but also derive from his "wide and extensive" reading.

In the interview with Fortune, Douglass makes explicit the international scope of his literary influences:

Who are my favorite authors? Among the poets, Shakespeare, Byron, Burns, Bryant, Whittier, and Longfellow; among the prose writers, Hugo, especially 'Les Miserables' and 'The Toilers of the Sea'; the works of Walter Scott, especially 'Ivanhoe'; Charlotte Bronte and Alexander Dumas, especially 'The Musketeer' and 'The Count of Monte Cristo.' I have a French edition of the latter, in three volumes, which I very much prize. I regard Theodore D. Weld's 'Slavery As It Is' as the most powerful work of its kind written in the anti-slavery cause. Of course, I also read those things in current literature of contemporaneous interest and the standard authors in history and social and political science. (*FDP* ser. 1, 5: 499)

This passage anticipates the widely cited moment in W. E. B. Du Bois's *Souls of Black Folk* (1903): "I sit with Shakespeare and he winces not. Across the color line I move arm in arm with Balzac and Dumas, where smiling men and welcoming women glide in gilded halls"

(90). Where Du Bois makes a poetic argument about his claims of access to canonicity, Douglass anatomizes his influences as they range across poetry, fiction, reportage, and social science. The investment of both Douglass and Du Bois in the French tradition suggests their affinities with the history of revolution as represented in Balzac, Dumas, and Hugo.⁷

Douglass's continued interest in the rubric of abolition decades after the end of its apparent heyday, both in the anti-slavery poetry of Bryant, Whittier, and Longfellow as well as in abolitionist prose works like Weld's, hints at its relevance to critiques of state-sanctioned racism at the end of the nineteenth century. This range of genres also prefigures the division in contemporary criticism of Douglass, between transatlantic literary historical and political-theoretical approaches to his work. Douglass's practice as a writer involves an especially rigorous theorization of abolition in literature in correspondence with Victor Hugo's oft-cited declaration that Romanticism is "liberalism in literature" (3). His reputation as a nineteenth century "representative man," a heroic man of letters in the ambit of world literature, and the "romance" of his life all reflect and refract generalizing claims about the nature of liberal freedoms and the role of literature in liberation.

Douglass's Romantic reading extends back decades from these late moments. In April 1846, during his first trip overseas, Douglass wrote a letter to the abolitionist Abigail Mott from Burns's birthplace in Ayr, Scotland, which also offers an extraordinary instance of early African Americanist literary criticism:

[Burns] broke loose from the moorings which society had thrown around him. Spurning all restraint, he sought a path for his feet, and, like all bold pioneers, he made crooked paths. We may lament it, we may weep over it, but in the language of another we shall lament and weep with him. The elements of character which urged him on are in us all, and influencing our conduct every day of our lives. We may pity him, but we can't despise him. We may condemn his faults, but only as we condemn our own. His very weakness was an index of our strength. Full of faults of a grievous nature, yet far more faultless than many who have come down to us in the pages of history as saints. He was a brilliant genius and like all of his class, did much good and much evil. Let us take the good and leave the evil—let us adopt his virtues but avoid his vices—let us pursue his wisdom but shun his folly; and as death has separated his noble spirit from the corrupt and contemptible lust with which it was encumbered, so let us separate his good from his evil deeds—thus we make him a blessing than a curse to the world. (*FDP* ser. 3, 1: 113–14)

Here Douglass works through the problem of Burns as a model of moral and political character, and thus as an object of cultural memory. His concerns with Burns's "evil" must come partly from the poet's long-held plan to move to Jamaica to work as an overseer on a plantation, only abandoned after the success of his *Poems, Chiefly in the Scottish Dialect* (1786). Douglass's interest in Burns's "vices" comes out of the context of the temperance movement, about which he lectured regularly. His prose acts as an analytical tool for dismantling poetic excess, and he writes for a world-historical "we" in managing the dynamic between forms: "We may condemn his faults, but only as we condemn our own. His very weakness was an index of our strength." The recursive, paratactic discriminations here point to a kind of abolitionist critical method—a kind of early version of what Nathaniel Mackey (following Wilson Harris) calls the "discrepant engagement" of African diasporic critical and aesthetic practice (19).⁸ The passage also offers a window onto the

development of Douglass's style, and anticipates the dialectical rhetoric of *My Bondage and My Freedom* a decade later.

Even at this early moment, Douglass imagines the process by which a life becomes "Romantic" as a complex series of selections, emphases, and erasures, carried out in a dynamic between the individual and a collective. He was likely thinking of Carlyle, whose reading of Burns in *On Heroes, Hero-Worship, and the Heroic in History* (1841) would then have been in the front of his mind.⁹ In that text, Carlyle's interest in Burns centers on the social and linguistic distance he travelled:

The largest soul of all the British lands came among us in the shape of a hard-handed Scottish peasant ... He gained a certain recognition, and is continuing to do so over all quarters of our wide Saxon world: wheresoever a Saxon dialect is spoken, it begins to be understood, by personal inspection of this or the other, that one of the most considerable men of the Eighteenth century was an Ayrshire Peasant named Robert Burns. (188–89)

No doubt Douglass saw his own marginality reflected in Burns's and hoped that he too might acquire "a certain recognition." In this passage, Carlyle echoes Burns's exchanges with Goethe on the question of world literature, and his sense of print as the vehicle through which "our wide Saxon world" would be transformed. For Carlyle, the figure of the "man of letters" plays a key role in this process, inasmuch as he "make[s] manifest to us" the "Divine Idea" unfolding across human history (156). Douglass's bids for canonicity suggest he believed that slavery and its abolition would come to play a central role in narratives of civilizational progress. Founding *The North Star* on returning from England in 1847, Douglass took up the urgency of abolitionist literary practice as both a day-to-day and world-historical effort. The thinking between genres Douglass did in the earliest years of his career would expand in his role as editor—an apotheosis of "the hero as a man of letters."¹⁰ He sought to register, in the variegated print culture of the antebellum period, the connections between his own life and the more universalizing, Romantic theory of liberation captured in the paper's masthead: "Right is of no sex; truth is of no color, God is the Father of us all—and all are brethren."

Between autobiography and political philosophy

Early African American literature has long been understood by its most careful readers as involving a range of formal experimentation well beyond the slave narrative. Along with a number of his contemporaries (notably William Wells Brown and Frances Ellen Watkins Harper), Douglass made a concerted effort to work in a number of genres, writing fiction, poetry, polemical and journalistic prose, and autobiography.¹¹ Scholarly work on Douglass's autobiographies often credits him with transforming the genre.¹² The beginnings of his intervention on the form of the autobiography and across genres lie in his movement from narrating slavery to theorizing about its effects. In an 1867 lecture, Douglass explains this aspect of his practice as a man of letters: "From this little bit of experience—slave experience—I have elaborated quite a lengthy chapter of political philosophy, applicable to the American people" (*FDP* ser. 1, 4: 160).

In *My Bondage and My Freedom* (1855), Douglass recalls how the management of white activists frustrated his philosophical ambitions. When he first became affiliated with the Massachusetts Anti-Slavery Society in the early 1840s, Douglass spoke under the aegis of its general agent, John A. Collins. Douglass recalls: "I was 'a graduate of the

peculiar institution,' Mr. Collins used to say, when introducing me, 'with my diploma written on my back!'" (*Autobiographies* 365). Collins and his associates insisted that Douglass restrict himself to straightforward narration of his physical experience, partly concerned that audiences would doubt his authenticity if he appeared too learned: "Give us the facts,' said Collins, 'we will take care of the philosophy.'" Douglass describes his reaction: "It did not entirely satisfy me to *narrate* wrongs; I felt like *denouncing* them" (367). Here, as above in the letter on Burns, we find Douglass developing a kind of dialectical method in thinking his range as a man of letters. In so doing, and in representing himself this way, Douglass articulates himself in relation to the more ideological registers of Romantic abolitionism and ultimately to the genre of political philosophy.

This tendency in Douglass has attracted the attention of contemporary political theorists.¹³ An important strain of this work takes off from the question of how Douglass articulates positions associated with classical liberalism. In *The Political Thought of Frederick Douglass* (2012), Nicholas Buccola writes: "Whatever the truth of Louis Hartz's famous contention that liberalism has been the hegemonic force in American political life, within the circles in which Douglass would run, his embrace of liberalism was anything but a foregone conclusion" (41). Nineteenth-century African American writers had at best limited access to the privileges associated with citizenship, and so their statements of commitment to liberal ideals have an inconclusive character that now interests theorists of liberalism's limitations. Consequently, the situational and historical variety of both slavery and anti-slavery political work has come to serve a revision of the conventionally decontextualized character of liberal political philosophy.

In a trenchant recent example of this mode, Neil Roberts's *Freedom as Marronage* (2015) hones in on the epigraph to *My Bondage and My Freedom*, a quotation from Coleridge: "By a principle essential to Christianity, a PERSON is eternally differenced from a THING; so that the idea of a HUMAN BEING, necessarily excludes the idea of PROPERTY IN THAT BEING" (*Autobiographies* 103). Lightly bowdlerized from the *General Introduction to the Encyclopedia Metropolitana; or, a Preliminary Treatise on Method* (1818), the epigraph serves several purposes: it frames slavery as a violation of Christian "principle" cast in terms of transcendental idealism, and it positions the book in relation to another hero of Anglophone letters. Coleridge's wavering commitments to abolition and liberalism make the citation ironic; Douglass would have struggled to sympathize with the poet's sentiments in "France: An Ode" (1798): "O Liberty! with profitless endeavor / Have I pursued thee, many a weary hour" (*Major Works* 92). Roberts points out that Douglass's depiction of freedom in *My Bondage* does not sustain the premise that "a PERSON is eternally differenced from a THING"—instead he finds Douglass returning again and again to the phrase "comparative freedom," by which he means to indicate the provisional and uncertain character of nineteenth-century freedom. Following this logic, Roberts argues for an asymmetrical but co-dependent relation between liberation and fugitivity: "freedom is perpetual, unfinished, and rooted in acts of flight that are at moments evanescent, durable, overlapping" (181). This premise elaborates Romantic freedom beyond liberalism, against Coleridge's equivocations and Hugo's equivalences. Roberts and other political theorists turn to Douglass because of the failure of liberal political theory to reckon the uneven development and distribution of freedom. Douglass's practice as a man of letters challenges implicitly white male formulations of liberalism especially

through its recursiveness—in which the experience of slavery acts as a reserve for a multi-genre abolitionist literary practice.

Formal and theoretical abstractions could never contain the crisis around slavery in the middle decades of the nineteenth century. Douglass's abolitionism periodically departs from, indeed exceeds, the rational parameters of political philosophy. In an 1860 essay entitled "The Prospect in the Future," Douglass writes of the immediately pre-war conditions facing abolitionist rhetoric: "You cannot relate a new fact, or frame an unfamiliar argument on this subject.—Reason and morality have emptied their casket of richest jewels into the lap of this cause, in vain" (*Life and Writings* 2: 497). Here we find Douglass in the mood of a kind of revolutionary Romantic agony—with a sense of the uselessness of logic and moral suasion and in the face of historical wrong. This is the mood of his support for John Brown, just then executed, a moment in which James Oakes complains that Douglass had "shelved his faith in the U.S. Constitution and replaced it with cynical clichés of a disillusioned Romantic" (101). However, at this impasse, Douglass had also begun to think about the future, and about the possibility that these moods would recur—that even in the lived and hypothetical aftermaths of slavery, new historical wrongs would emerge to thwart the "Divine Idea" of freedom. As he had in the past, Douglass turned to poetry when "reason and morality" appeared exhausted.

The Black self-made man as an abolition Romanticism

In this period before the Civil War broke out, Douglass wrote what might be construed as one of his most optimistic speeches, not about the political possibilities of abolition but about the promises of possessive individualism. He first composed the lecture "Self-Made Men" in 1859, revising and delivering it repeatedly into the early 1890s. A core constellation of references to Romantic writers—Burns, Wordsworth, and Carlyle—remains intact across its many incarnations. None of these figures were enthusiastic abolitionists, but here, as in the Coleridge epigraph, perhaps the citational irony is purposeful. Douglass takes as his starting point that the figure of the self-made man is a kind of contradiction: no man can ever truly be self-made. Consequently, both in relation to transatlantic tradition and his central theme, Douglass deploys the selective, recursive, and dialectical method that we first saw in the letter on Burns from Ayr.

Douglass begins with the boilerplate ideology that usually characterizes American writing on the topic: "We may explain success mainly by one word and that word is WORK! WORK!! WORK!!! WORK!!!!" (*FDP* ser. 1, 5: 556). He turns quickly from this conditional and rhythmic populism to more rigorous speculation on the experience of individuality:

A single human soul standing here upon the margin we call TIME, overlooking, in the vastness of its range, the solemn past which can neither be recalled nor remodeled, ever chafing against finite limitations, entangled with inimitable contradictions, eagerly seeking to scan the invisible past and pierce the clouds and darkness of an ever mysterious future, has attractions for thought and study, more numerous and powerful than all the other objects beneath the sky. To human thought and inquiry he is broader than all visible worlds, loftier than all heights and deeper than all depths. (*FDP* ser. 1, 5: 547)

Here the self-made man struggles against sublime forces beyond his practical control and perceptual apprehension. Douglass's figurative abstraction here echoes the American

Romantic figure of the “Man in the Open Air,” which F. O. Matthiessen, borrowing from Walt Whitman, found at the center of the literature of the 1850s (626–56).

By now it should seem predictable that Douglass would turn to his literary influences to compensate for the limitations of human perception. From the Kantian uncertainties above, he begins to think in more geopolitical and grounded literary terms. He quotes Burns’s “For A’ That and A’ That” to suggest that while in Europe, “A king can make a belted knight, / A marquis, duke and a’ that,” the liberal society of the US makes the best starting point for would-be self-made men. Later, Douglass cites “The Twa Dogs”:

“I see how folks live that hae riches,
But surely poor folks maun be witches.”

The various conditions of men and the different uses they make of their powers and opportunities in life, are full of puzzling contrasts and contradictions. (*FDP* ser. 1, 5: 551)

In these citations, Douglass relies on Burns for both a sense of rooted vernacular life and a sense of historical relativism. He lays claim to his affinities with Burns while also taking his distance from the poet’s European context. This approach formally complicates the labors of self-making, but also clarifies its obscurities.

Now having framed his ostensibly popular subject in both transcendental and geopolitical terms, Douglass turns to the question of Black freedom, and in so doing, unfolds a theory of racial progress:

I have said “Give the negro fair play and let him alone.” I meant all that I said and a good deal more than some understand by fair play. It is not fair play to start the negro out in life, from nothing and with nothing, while others start with the advantage of a thousand years behind them. He 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. Should the American people put a school house in every valley of the South and a church on every hill side and supply the one with teachers and the other with preachers, for a hundred years to come, they would not then have given fair play to the negro. (*FDP* ser. 1, 5: 557)

Douglass theorizes the experience of his Black contemporaries in terms of the “invisible past” and “mysterious future” which frame the “human soul.” He treats historical time as a contested figure, in which slavery and racism have conspired to give white people an “advantage of a thousand years.” This argument elaborates the challenge of “comparative freedom” to historically closed models of liberal idealism and makes clear that the distance between gradations of freedom is not just spatial but temporal, not just human but racial.

Douglass contextualizes his thoughts on the postbellum political situation of Black life in the last iteration of his autobiography, *The Life and Times of Frederick Douglass* (1881, rev. 1892):

He was free from the individual master, but the slave of society ... He was free from the old plantation, but he had nothing but the dusty road under his feet. He was free from the old quarter that once gave him shelter, but a slave to the rains of summer and to the frosts of winter. He was, in a word, literally turned loose, naked, hungry, and destitute, to the open sky. (*Autobiographies* 815)

Here Douglass continues to take a kind of allegorically singular “negro” as his protagonist. The masculinity of this figure no doubt foreshortens Douglass’s vision, despite the claim of the masthead of *The North Star*: “Right is of no sex.” Its abstraction, however, seeks to counter pernicious liberal thinking about the impoverishment of Black people, and to generalize the precariousness of their “self-making.” The passage figures Black people between liberalism and abolition in ways appropriate to the later decades of the nineteenth century, but also in ways that anticipate the historical echoes of enslavement in our own moment.

Conclusion

Douglass’s hopes about the promise of the abolition movement, the Civil War, and the Reconstruction were dashed by the emergence of Jim Crow social policy at the end of the nineteenth century. His body of work, however, continues to serve as an important resource for thinking about Black liberation. His canonicity derives both from the scope of his prophetic vision and from the sophistication with which he moved between Romantic genres. Angela Davis first began writing about Douglass’s autobiographical writing as a kind of political theory by other means while incarcerated in the late 1960s, and has consistently articulated the movement against mass incarceration from the standpoint of what Du Bois called “abolition democracy.”¹⁴ Unapologetically presentist scholarship like Keeanga-Yamahtta Taylor’s *From #BlackLivesMatter to Black Liberation* (2016) and Christopher J. Lebron’s *The Making of Black Lives Matter* (2017) has recourse to Douglass’s ideas at a remove of more than a century. The Movement for Black Lives recognizes Douglass in ways Trump and his ilk would surely prefer to ignore. I have argued here that the prophetic dimensions of Douglass’s prose have to do with his self-conscious intervention on world literature as Black man of letters.

The return of abolition discourse in the twenty-first century requires revisiting an old argument against it—that its advocates were “monomaniacs,” and thus that they could manage no social vision beyond the destruction of slavery as an institution. In his 1859 “Eulogy of William Jay,” Douglass argued against this point of view: “Abolitionists have been called men of one idea, but ... [that] one idea was immensely comprehensive, and capable of manifold applications” (*FDP* ser. 1, 3: 266). His argument here and elsewhere counters the premise of abolitionist myopia with a perspective approaching what might be thought of in world literary terms as universalism or in Marxist terms as totalization. Manisha Sinha’s recent history of the abolition movement, *The Slave’s Cause* (2016), makes a related case that abolition activism was “continuous” across the Atlantic world from the eighteenth to the nineteenth century, and that its advocates were “hybrids” working in tandem with other forms of reform and revolution (3, 5).

Another way to think of abolition’s “manifold applications” is in terms of genre, and the complex array of forms in which Douglass and his contemporaries worked. I have made the case here for reading Douglass’s abolitionism through the rubric of Romantic prophecy. My sense of this, framed by both literary historical and political-theoretical readings of Douglass, has been that Hugo’s definition of Romanticism as “liberalism in literature” required a concomitant “abolition in literature,” and that perhaps it still does. We should take note of the degree to which Douglass’s investment in contextualizing his work within Romantic tradition plays a role now in his “getting recognized more and more.” But reading Douglass through Romanticism should hardly serve the ends of white

supremacy—on the contrary, doing so should point to the historically necessary relation between liberalism and abolition, and help us to think the neo-abolition that will meet the neoliberalism of the contemporary.

Notes

1. Many of the most widely read texts of the tradition appear around the middle of the century, roughly contemporaneous with the work of white American Romantics like Herman Melville, Ralph Waldo Emerson, and Walt Whitman. For the crucial relation between early African American literature and Romanticism, note the seminal works of African Americanist criticism that take off from self-avowedly Hegelian readings of Douglass. Houston Baker's *Blues, Ideology, and Afro-American Literature* (1984), Henry Louis Gates Jr.'s *Figures in Black* (1987), Paul Gilroy's *The Black Atlantic* (1993), and Fred Moten's *In the Break* (2003) all locate Douglass at the center of articulations of Black modernity framed by Hegel. Douglass's own interest in German Romanticism was spurred by his relationship with Otilie Assing, a German émigré to the US who became his friend for decades. Their relationship is detailed in Diedrich, not least the pair's shared interest in Feuerbach's *The Essence of Christianity* (1841). For nineteenth-century African American writers' travels in England and engagements with British literature, see Tamarkin, Dickerson, and Hack. Other work on Romanticism and early African American literature includes Andrews, McBride, Nwankwo, and Castiglia.
2. A range of scholars have taken an interest in Black authors' citation of Lord Byron's *Childe Harold's Pilgrimage*: philosophers, literary historians, poet-critics, and historians interested in masculinity, theology, Black self-help, and revolution have all weighed in on this reference. Douglass plays a key role in this conversation, not least because his work is by far the most carefully archived of his contemporaries. For readings of Douglass's citation of Byron, see Sundquist (1993), Levine (1997), Stauffer (2002), Phillips (2010), Hickman (2016), and Sandler (2017). The exhaustive and scrupulous annotation of *The Frederick Douglass Papers* provides a picture of his range of reference, not least to Romantic literature. Douglass's centrality to the African American literary tradition has been the subject of debate since McDowell, which reads Douglass's masculine heroism as "mythologized" to the detriment of historical understandings of the experiences and accomplishments of Black women (196). See also Edwards.
3. For Carlyle's relation to the emergent discourse of world literature, see Prendergast. My sense of the challenge posed by the literature of slavery and abolition to dehistoricized and flat models of world literature is informed by the work of postcolonial critiques by Slaughter and Allan.
4. My thinking on prophecy here is informed by Balfour.
5. See Pratt for an argument about the figure of the stranger in Douglass that provides a useful vantage on what I refer to here as a problem of recognition.
6. These journeys led Douglass to draw parallels between the experience of Black people in the US and internal colonies like Ireland and Scotland in Great Britain. His early interest in the Scottish led him to borrow his surname from a character in Walter Scott's *The Lady of the Lake* (1810). For Douglass and Scotland, see Pettinger 42–46. For more general accounts of parallels between US slavery and forms of oppression in England, see Cunliffe.
7. For Douglass and European revolutionary practice, see Marrs.
8. Mackey describes "discrepant engagement" as "practices that, in the interest of opening presumably closed orders of identity and signification, accent fissure, fracture, incongruity, the rickety, imperfect fit between word and world" (19).
9. Douglass referred to his attitude towards Garrison in this period as that of a "hero worshiper" in *My Bondage and My Freedom* (*Autobiographies* 362); however, Douglass also consistently expressed disagreement with Carlyle's writing against abolition and Black enfranchisement from the late 1840s to the late 1860s.
10. For Douglass as an editor, see Vogel (1–16), Fanuzzi, and Fishkin and Peterson.

11. Discussions of genre in studies of Romanticism can be usefully applied to questions that have long motivated research in early African American literature. For instance, Susan Wolfson's concept of "formal agency" (27) as a way of describing generic constraint has useful applications for thinking the slave narrative. Likewise, Siskin and Poovey on the role of genre in Romantic period political economy should be extended to abolition genres as well.
12. See Blassingame's introductions to editions of the autobiographical writings (*FDP* ser. 2, 1: xvii–xlix and 2: xiii–xliii), as well as Olney, Sekora, and Levine.
13. For Douglass as a philosopher, see Angela Y. Davis's 1971 "Unfinished Lectures on Liberation—II" (collected in *The Angela Y. Davis Reader*), Waldo E. Martin's 1986 intellectual biography, and Judith Shklar's *American Citizenship: The Quest for Inclusion* (1991), as well as Boxill, Meyers, Lawson, and Hooker.
14. For "abolition democracy," see Du Bois, *Black Reconstruction* (184–91) and Davis, *Abolition*.

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