

# Rebirth of a Nation: Frederick Douglass as Postwar Founder in *Life and Times*

EDWARD TANG

In 1875, a year from the upcoming centennial celebrations, Frederick Douglass commemorated the African American presence in the nation's revolutionary past and Reconstruction present. "If ... any man should ask me what colored people have to do with the Fourth of July, my answer is ready," he proclaimed to a black audience in Washington, DC. "Colored people have had something to do with almost everything of vital importance in the life and progress of this great country" from its beginnings in 1776 to its greatest test in 1861 and beyond.<sup>1</sup> Douglass drew upon the Revolution's legacies of liberty and democracy, urging his listeners to meet the challenge of incorporating themselves into the nation's citizenry despite sustained white resistance. Albeit a tall order, he placed this agenda in a broader perspective: "The fathers of this Republic ... had their trial ninety-nine years ago. The colored citizens of this Republic are about to have their trial now."<sup>2</sup> The moment was full of possibilities: African Americans, he emphasized, faced comparable obstacles and hardships much like the founders themselves. Implied too within Douglass's invocation of the revolutionaries was the potential heroism and accomplishments of which African Americans were similarly capable, just as they had proven in the past.

Like other reformers of his time, Douglass continually relied on the power of the founders' words and deeds to advocate for more progressive social changes. This rhetorical strategy shows through clearly not only throughout his speeches but also in his autobiographies. Recent scholarship has emphasized how Douglass's first two published lives, *Narrative of the Life of*

Edward Tang is an Associate Professor in the Department of American Studies at the University of Alabama, Tuscaloosa, Alabama, 35487-0214, USA.

<sup>1</sup> "The Color Question: An Address Delivered in Washington, D.C., on July 5, 1875," *The Frederick Douglass Papers*, ed. John W. Blassingame and John R. McKivigan (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1991), 4: 415.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, 4: 416.

*Frederick Douglass* (1845) and *My Bondage and My Freedom* (1855) reveal the author's ironic yet problematic claiming of the Revolution's language and ideology to interrogate the venerated "master" narratives of the nation's history. Eric Sundquist, Russ Castronovo, Priscilla Wald, and others have evaluated how these two different works adapted and contested a national narrative of freedom and citizenship that discounted African Americans as participants. Sundquist in particular argues that the *Narrative* should be read more as an abolitionist polemic than the presentation of a developed self. The *Narrative* here serves almost as a literary transcription of Douglass's early oratory on a par with the revolutionary pamphleteers of the 1760s and 1770s. Additionally, Sundquist proposes *My Bondage and My Freedom* as the penultimate expression of republicanism and revolution. This second work documented through more overt revolutionary rhetoric an independent and self-assured Douglass, free not only in a legal sense but also from the controlling guidance of white abolitionists like William Lloyd Garrison.<sup>3</sup>

The third autobiography, *Life and Times of Frederick Douglass* (1881; rev. 1892), garnered less critical attention within these analyses perhaps because it fitted imprecisely with the rhetorical or thematic patterns of resistance and revolution. Unlike the earlier autobiographies or even Douglass's speeches, *Life and Times* carried a voluminous bulk, self-satisfied tone, and lack of narrative energy. Thus several scholars have characterized the third published life as a tired work that failed in revolutionary dynamism and literary aestheticism.<sup>4</sup> The subject matter of Douglass's life in post-Civil War America followed this less-than-revolutionary path when he became compromised by his rise to power within official structures of federal governance. He received several political appointments from the Republican Party,

<sup>3</sup> Eric J. Sundquist, *To Wake the Nations: Race in the Making of American Literature* (Cambridge: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1993), 83–134; Russ Castronovo, *Fathering the Nation: American Genealogies of Slavery and Freedom* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1995), 190–200; Castronovo, *Negro Citizenship: Death, Eroticism, and the Public Sphere in the Nineteenth-Century United States* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2001), 50–61; Priscilla Wald, *Constituting Americans: Cultural Anxiety and Narrative Form* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1995), 14–105. See also Robert S. Levine, *Martin Delany, Frederick Douglass, and the Politics of Representative Identity* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1997), 99–143; William L. Andrews, *To Tell a Free Story: The First Century of Afro-American Autobiography, 1760–1865* (Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1986), 123–44, 214–39.

<sup>4</sup> Sundquist, 85–86; James Matlack, "The Autobiographies of Frederick Douglass," *Phylon* 40 (Mar. 1979): 25–6; James Olney, "The Founding Fathers – Frederick Douglass and Booker T. Washington," in *Slavery and the Literary Imagination*, ed. Deborah E. McDowell and Arnold Rampersad (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1989), 19; William S. McFeely, *Frederick Douglass* (New York: W.W. Norton & Co., 1991), 7, 311.

serving as US Marshall for the District of Columbia and Minister to Haiti. He also campaigned dutifully for the party's candidates. But prominent Republicans, in order to advance white political interests, often ignored the concerns of both Douglass and the freed populace. Douglass's personal successes, dictated by the ideal of self-reliance, furthermore distanced him from the difficult economic and social realities still facing many African Americans in the late nineteenth century.

*Life and Times* does elaborate on the two previous autobiographies' chronicling of Douglass's continued struggle for African American rights. But as well as updating this remarkable life, the third book performs valuable cultural work within the trilogy of lives by expanding on how Douglass interpreted the historical memories of the nation's beginnings founded in part by slavery. If the *Narrative* and *My Bondage and My Freedom* drew critical similarities to colonial resistance and revolution during the 1760s and 1770s, then *Life and Times* can be read as a consolidating document in two ways. The work brought Douglass's life story to a more developed conclusion but also attempted to reconfigure the processes of nation building in the 1780s and 1790s. Underscoring the racial inequities that continually burdened African Americans, Douglass implicitly called forth historical parallels to the nation-building era in his quest to amend the course of nation rebuilding during the 1880s and 1890s. He did so by employing and critiquing the unrealized ideals from the post-revolutionary age to add historical and moral credence to his reform efforts after the Civil War.

Given this reading and compositional sequence, *Life and Times* both complements and complicates the textual strategies in the *Narrative* and *My Bondage and My Freedom*. Among other literary critics, Henry Louis Gates, Jr. and John Ernest have explored how Douglass fashioned his three representative selves through a mastery of the spoken and written word. Ernest particularly uses *Life and Times* as an important benchmark by which to measure how Douglass's self-presentation changed in increasingly divergent and complex ways over the several decades of writing. The transition from the *Narrative* to the later two autobiographies reveals a public identity divided initially by simple binary oppositions – slavery *vs.* freedom, humanity *vs.* property – to one incorporating multiple, even contradictory storylines.<sup>5</sup> The three lives, however, can be interpreted in a more encompassing historical framework: as a series, they recall and interrogate the three different yet

<sup>5</sup> Henry Louis Gates, Jr., *Figures in Black: Words, Signs, and the "Racial" Self* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1987), 99–108; John Ernest, *Resistance and Reformation in Nineteenth-Century African-American Literature* (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 1995), 140–79.

interrelated processes of resistance, revolution, and national consolidation. Here, Douglass transformed and destabilized the nation's understandings of its legacies by inscribing his lives as a microcosm of this broader past. But the metaphor of national development established limits on how he presented himself as a social activist during and after Reconstruction. As a leading advocate for African American rights, Douglass also had to cooperate with white political leaders and institutions that did not always have the freed population's interests in mind. These roles of provocateur and compromiser often conflicted with each other, and *Life and Times* reflected Douglass's conundrum. The work simultaneously reinforced and negated the rhetoric of resistance and revolution espoused in the first two autobiographies, dulling its own effectiveness as a tool of social reform.

Several episodes from *Life and Times* support this approach to reading it as a consolidating document that completes yet also makes problematic Douglass's revisions of his earlier selves in the *Narrative* and *My Bondage and My Freedom*. I will briefly examine three topics in particular: the work's contextual relationship to Benjamin Franklin's *Autobiography* (1771–90); Douglass's appropriation of Patrick Henry and *The Federalist* (1787–88) to memorialize John Brown and the Civil War; and Douglass's interactions with the freed people.

### WRITING POSTWAR LIVES

The revolutionary founder with whom most scholars have compared Douglass is Benjamin Franklin. Franklin's autobiography set the standards for self-making, self-reliance, and self-improvement in American culture. Past critics have analyzed how Douglass's production of his life in the *Narrative* mimicked Franklin's in tone, style, and themes, while also noting their differences to mark the problematic convergence of African American and white "canonical" American literature. Both Franklin and Douglass charted their rise from obscurity to varying levels of public fame. Even their narratives remained incomplete in the telling of their lives. Douglass's *Narrative* ended in 1841 at the antislavery meeting in Nantucket, Massachusetts when his freedom was still uncertain. In the eyes of the law, he was a hunted fugitive. Franklin's *Autobiography* ended in the late 1750s; the last thirty years of his life received no notice.<sup>6</sup> Yet, when examined from the contexts of memory, Franklin composed most of his work after

<sup>6</sup> Rafia Zafar, *We Wear the Mask: African Americans Write American Literature, 1760–1870* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1997), 89–116; Olney, 2–7.

the Revolution, and mainly from the perspective of an elderly man who looked back on a life filled with achievements. Douglass, in writing the *Narrative*, was in the prime of his youth and was still considered a runaway slave who could at any moment be captured and returned to his master.

The cultural and historical circumstances in which Douglass composed *Life and Times* align more closely with those in which Franklin wrote his *Autobiography*. Franklin created his text in four different periods and locations during his life. The first portion of the work, addressed to his son William in 1771, was the only one written before the Revolution. He composed the last three sections after the Revolution: in France in 1784, Philadelphia in 1788, and again in Philadelphia where Franklin died in 1790. Likewise, *Life and Times* appeared after the Civil War when African Americans gained their freedom. Franklin and Douglass narrated their lives from the vantage point of having been successful in the world and mainly within periods of postwar nation building. By this time, both men had been printers and editors of newspapers, were involved in establishing institutions for the public welfare, and were recognized as self-made men who had become well-regarded leaders. The two figures also approached spirituality through what Waldo Martin, Jr. calls “religious liberalism,” downplaying the role of providence in their successes. Franklin and Douglass still attributed their good luck in life to divine benevolence, but neither entirely believed in supernatural intervention in human agency.<sup>7</sup>

Writing from the perspective of accomplished old age, both Franklin and Douglass partly intended their postwar lives as guides for the future generations of newly constituted political states. Franklin attributed his success in life to a variety of characteristics and practices designed as a model for the citizens of the new republic. Through his charts and schedules, he outlined his experiment in self-improvement to attain virtue, industry, orderliness, and temperance, among other characteristics. When Franklin began the first section of his autobiography in 1771, he wanted to record the family genealogy for his son, as well as to outline the traits and manners of character that were “fit to be imitated.”<sup>8</sup> Yet, after William became the loyalist governor of New Jersey and the Revolution interrupted the writing process, Franklin took up the manuscript in 1784 and addressed the work to the citizenry of the new nation.

<sup>7</sup> Waldo E. Martin, Jr., *The Mind of Frederick Douglass* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 1984), 275–76.

<sup>8</sup> *Benjamin Franklin's Autobiography: An Authoritative Text, Backgrounds, Criticism*, ed. J. A. Leo Lemay and P. M. Zall (New York: W.W. Norton & Co., 1986), 1.

At this narrative juncture, Franklin included prefatory letters from close associates, Abel James and Benjamin Vaughan, both of whom urged him to continue his life story for the benefit of a wider ranging posterity. James flattered and urged Franklin to persist in writing the *Autobiography* for didactic purposes: "I know of no Character living nor many of them put together, who has so much in his Power as Thyself to promote a greater Spirit of Industry and early Attention to Business, Frugality and Temperance with the American Youth." Vaughan struck a similar chord: "It is in youth that we plant our chief habits and prejudices; it is in youth that we take our party as to profession, pursuits, and matrimony."<sup>9</sup> Though abandoned by his son, Franklin still had the young and growing nation as a broader family to rear as a founding patriarch. The initial aims of the *Autobiography* applied as well to the new citizenry: that of setting an example of virtue, frugality, and industry for the country, if not for the world. The work divulged the strengths of and possibilities for individual and collective self-rule.

This strategy is apparent in *Life and Times*. From the start, Douglass attempted to remind readers of his more modest beginnings by its subtitle, *Written by Himself*, a reference to the same caption in the *Narrative*. The phrase in this first book authenticated Douglass's human identity by signifying his triumph of literacy in a society that denied him even the rudiments of education. By recalling the *Narrative*'s subtitle in *Life and Times*, Douglass interpreted the social conditions of post-Civil War America with a comparable sense of urgency for the plight of African Americans as he had done in the antebellum era. In 1851, he wrote to fellow abolitionist Gerrit Smith: "The fact that Negroes are turning Book makers may possibly serve to remove the popular impression that they are fit only for Bootblacking. ... I have often felt that what the colored people want most in this country is character. They want manly aspirations and a firm though modest self-reliance."<sup>10</sup> Pervasive doubts and prejudices within white America certainly remained about the potential of blacks, before as slaves and now as citizens. The third autobiography functioned then in a similar manner as the lives portrayed in the *Narrative* and *My Bondage and My Freedom*. Douglass desired to present himself to the wider black community and the rest of the nation as an archetype that disclosed the extent of individual capabilities.

Now that the Civil War had eradicated slavery as an institution, Douglass may have felt that African Americans required an example of living in

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, 58, 59.

<sup>10</sup> Frederick Douglass to Gerrit Smith, 21 Jan. 1851, quoted in *Frederick Douglass: Selected Speeches and Writings*, ed. Philip S. Foner (Chicago: Lawrence Hill Books, 1999), 172.

freedom. Neither the *Narrative* nor *My Bondage and My Freedom*, whatever their rhetorical or poetic genius to elucidate Douglass's life, would have served that purpose. They were fashioned to help end slavery, and their contents focused mostly on Douglass's time spent as human chattel. Biographer William McFeely writes that little is known about how Douglass created his three autobiographies; he left no record or indication of the writing process in his notes or letters.<sup>11</sup> Despite this scarcity of information, McFeely surmised that in offering another autobiography Douglass wanted to keep the brutal history of slavery alive within the nation's memory. The aged reformer sought to remind the white citizenry that emancipation required more than a proclamation or a civil war to better the impoverished conditions of blacks.<sup>12</sup>

Perhaps too the challenge of offering models of behavior for the freed people and refuting white skepticism about black abilities moved Douglass to rewrite his life once again. Returning to Benjamin Franklin may offer some clarity here. Although Franklin's narrative was unfinished, he composed most of it after the Revolution when political and intellectual leaders worried over the mass of new citizenry who no longer followed a king. Guidelines for temperance, industry, and enlightenment were necessary to ensure the stability of new social interactions within a new polity. Throughout his lectures and editorials, Douglass emphasized that African Americans would have to adopt the virtues of industry and self-reliance to thrive in the historically momentous aftermath of civil war and emancipation. "[O]ur destiny is largely in our own hands," he declared in an 1883 speech commemorating the twenty-first anniversary of emancipation. "If we succeed in the race of life, it must be by our own energies, and our own exertions. Others may clear the road, but we must go forward, or be left behind in the race of life."<sup>13</sup>

In this light, *Life and Times* can be read in a similar fashion to Franklin's autobiography. George L. Ruffin, an African American legislator from Massachusetts who introduced *Life and Times*, wrote in Franklinian terms about the work: "With this example, the black boy as well as the white boy can take hope and courage in the race of life. ... It is inspiring to know that the days of self-sacrifice and self-development are not passed."<sup>14</sup>

<sup>11</sup> McFeely, 115, 182.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, 311–12.

<sup>13</sup> Douglass, "The United States Cannot Remain Half-Slave and Half-Free," in *The Life and Writings of Frederick Douglass*, ed. Philip S. Foner (New York: International Publishers, 1975), 4: 366.

<sup>14</sup> Frederick Douglass, *Autobiographies: Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, An American Slave; My Bondage and My Freedom; Life and Times of Frederick Douglass*, ed. Henry



He optimistically emphasized Douglass's impact on youth as Abel James and Benjamin Vaughan had done earlier for Franklin's text. But Douglass's work would be more incorporative than Franklin's. To Ruffin, distinctions of color or race would be transformed into healthy, masculine competition, "the race of life," in economic and social advancement – a thought reinforced by Douglass in his 1883 speech. Despite whatever racial hatred, social disparities, or institutional roadblocks African Americans were to face, Ruffin proposed Douglass's life as the standard that others ideally could imitate in quite radical circumstances.

### PATRICK HENRY AND PUBLIUS

Another revolutionary founder, Patrick Henry, also served Douglass's purposes for nation rebuilding in the late nineteenth century. Earlier in the *Narrative* and *My Bondage and My Freedom*, Henry's rhetoric held out encouraging possibilities for slaves to resist and fight, even to the death, against their oppressive masters and degrading conditions. As Douglass proclaimed in the *Narrative*: "In coming to a fixed determination to run away, we did more than Patrick Henry, when he resolved upon liberty or death" (*N*: 74). The slaves' resistance literally and figuratively embodied the founder's challenge. To Douglass, they appropriated and proceeded beyond Henry's words to match their own actions at great bodily risk.

During the 1880s, the original allure of Patrick Henry's words still retained their power for Douglass when he sought to reconfigure the nation's historical memories of the Revolution and the Civil War. As part of his "Liberty or Death" speech in the House of Burgesses, the Virginia statesman contended in 1775: "Three millions of people armed in the holy cause of liberty, and in such a country that we possess, are invincible by any force which our enemy can send against us."<sup>15</sup> Although Henry praised the glories of America on the verge of independence, his words remained to Douglass unfulfilled promises with the continued existence of slavery. Commemorating the Civil War, Douglass remarked in *Life and Times*: "It was a great thing to achieve American independence when we numbered three millions, but it was a greater thing to save this country from dismemberment and ruin when it numbered thirty millions" (*LT*: 765). In making this

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Louis Gates, Jr. (New York: Library of America, 1994), 468. Further quotations will be from this edition; page references will appear parenthetically in the text preceded by *N* for the *Narrative*, *BF* for *My Bondage and My Freedom*, and *LT* for *Life and Times*.

<sup>15</sup> Patrick Henry quoted in William Wirt, *Sketches in the Life and Character of Patrick Henry* (Philadelphia: Thomas, Cowperthwait & Co., 1841), 94.



statement, he once again proved that African Americans, by helping to keep the nation true to its inaugural ideals, accomplished more than Patrick Henry, as asserted earlier in the *Narrative*. Douglass proclaimed that the Civil War was not only the second American Revolution, but a more important moment in the nation's history as well. From this perspective, Douglass and likeminded others surpassed the founders, even as he recognized that the Revolution's ideals and language were still needed to give moral force to his intentions of forming that more perfect union.

Douglass realized that within the contexts of nation rebuilding the Virginia orator had to play a slightly different mnemonic role from the one he had performed earlier. If anything, the image of Henry asserting "liberty or death" only fueled "the Southern rebellion," as Douglass and other Northerners often phrased it, to protect slavery and secede from the Union. The challenge for Douglass after the Civil War was to reclaim and redirect the power of Henry's words toward defining a more incorporative state. In the end, he used Henry to elaborate on two issues that, however antithetical to one another, were essential to his vision for a reconstituted nation: the Federalists' argument for a stronger centralized government during the 1780s, and the commemoration of John Brown's 1859 attack on that very government at Harpers Ferry, Virginia.

From the Civil War to the 1880s, Douglass often referred to the Federalist ideals of the post-revolutionary era to clarify his position on nation rebuilding. During the earlier confederation period, Patrick Henry allied himself with the Antifederalists. Douglass noted in an 1862 column for *The Independent*, "Patrick Henry, one of the leaders of the struggle for severing the colonies from the British crown, declared himself against the Constitution." Henry had objected to the document, fearing that the federal government would use its enhanced power to abolish slavery. "The Constitution," Douglass dryly remarked, "was too anti-slavery for Mr. Henry."<sup>16</sup> With the South desiring to maintain slavery, the Civil War partly became for Douglass a battle over which constitution would predominate: the federal constitution created after the Revolution or the new constitution of the Confederacy. Douglass had claimed since the 1850s that the US Constitution had been an antislavery document, and if the Civil War for the North was to protect that legacy, then the conflict was, more importantly, an antislavery war. Douglass's line of argument continued into the postbellum era when, in the interpretive conflicts over the Civil War's meanings, Northern and

<sup>16</sup> "The Slaves Appeal to Great Britain," in *Life and Writings of Frederick Douglass*, 3: 303.

Southern whites sought a national reconciliation at the expense of black citizenship.<sup>17</sup>

Within these struggles for historical recognition and political rights, Douglass desired a more inclusive process of nation rebuilding that would counter any attempts at maintaining or widening the racial divide. Especially after the Civil War, he shared the aims of the Constitution's framers for creating a politically stable Union to a greater extent than he did with Patrick Henry's revolutionary call for liberty or death. This shift in emphasis becomes apparent from Douglass's new concerns in the late nineteenth century. The rhetoric and metaphors of colonial resistance and revolution, as evidenced in the *Narrative* and *My Bondage and My Freedom*, had changed in meaning and purpose for him. This altered narrative strategy in deciphering the nation's past coincided with the larger transformations in how federal power would be exercised now that the Republicans and their supporters had gained the upper hand. Among them, Douglass modified his interpretations of and uses for Patrick Henry to more fully realize the possibilities for both blacks and whites in a post-Civil War nation.

The transition from a revolution in ending slavery to postwar nation rebuilding becomes apparent in the 1892 revisions for *Life and Times*. Douglass observed "that government is better than anarchy, and that patient reform is better than violent revolution" (*LT*: 969). Although the circumstances in which Douglass was writing had changed dramatically since composing his earlier autobiographies, he stated this point as an aphorism that held true throughout time. But like the founders of the constitutional period, he craved political and economic stability through a consolidating process that rebuked earlier arguments for keeping federal authority decentralized. In an 1889 interview aptly entitled "One Country, One Law, One Liberty for All Citizens," Douglass lambasted the postwar South's suppression of black voting practices through violence and fraud. The national interest, he maintained, took precedence over states' rights in the post-Civil War era of rebuilding: "Whatever may have been the true theory of the organic law of the land before the [Civil War], the suppression of that [Southern] rebellion swept away, not only slavery, but the pretension of sovereignty of the individual states, and established a nation within the limits of the United States."<sup>18</sup> The South's continued harassment of blacks and strong reluctance to accept this piece of political theory increasingly

<sup>17</sup> David W. Blight, *Frederick Douglass' Civil War: Keeping Faith in Jubilee* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1989), 175–239; Blight, *Race and Reunion: The Civil War in American Memory* (Cambridge: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2001).

<sup>18</sup> "One Country, One Law, One Liberty for All," *The Frederick Douglass Papers*, 5: 400.

frustrated Douglass. The Civil War and the ensuing constitutional amendments should have decided for all time the question of sovereignty to incorporate and protect the freedmen's rights and privileges.

Douglass's point is analogous to the eighteenth-century Federalists' arguments on popular sovereignty and its relation to the Constitution. During the debates at the Philadelphia convention, the Antifederalists could not imagine a state's independent authority existing within federal sovereignty; one supremacy would conflict with the other. But James Wilson, a Federalist delegate from Pennsylvania, provided the definitive answer: sovereignty originated neither from state nor federal institutions, but "*resides* in the PEOPLE, as the fountain of [all] government."<sup>19</sup> According to this logic, states were never in a position to lose their sovereignty since they never possessed it. The people-at-large, Wilson concluded, were the ultimate dispensers of power to both state and federal governments.<sup>20</sup> Likewise, in the wake of the Fourteenth Amendment, Douglass continued his case that voting rights in the South "is a national question, and one which should be ... decided in favor of what is just, honorable, and for the best interests of the whole American people," now comprised of African Americans as well. To survive and proceed as a nation, the parts could not dictate to the whole.<sup>21</sup>

With this new postwar attitude, Douglass reconfigured the dialectic of Patrick Henry's "liberty or death" rhetoric. In an 1883 speech celebrating the twenty-first anniversary of the Emancipation Proclamation, Douglass proclaimed: "There is but one destiny ... left for us, and that is to make ourselves and be made by others a part of the American people in every sense of the word. Assimilation and not isolation is our true policy and natural destiny." Douglass suggested that the relationship between white and black Americans was reciprocal. He played on the nature of self-making, expanding the idea of self-reliance and race-consciousness by building on the possibilities "made by others" to construct together a more inclusive, newly formed Union. In a key phrase that followed, Douglass reversed the relationship between liberty and death that so powerfully informed his earlier fight against slavery, stating: "Unification for us is life: separation is death."<sup>22</sup> Patrick Henry in the 1770s declared that liberty meant divesting the colonies from the Britain Empire just as Douglass in the mid-nineteenth

<sup>19</sup> James Wilson quoted in Gordon S. Wood, *The Creation of the American Republic, 1776–1787* (New York: W.W. Norton & Co., 1972), 530. <sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*, 530–31.

<sup>21</sup> "One Country, One Law, One Liberty for All," *The Frederick Douglass Papers*, 5: 400.

<sup>22</sup> "The United States Cannot Remain Half-Slave and Half-Free," in *Life and Writings of Frederick Douglass*, 4: 370.

century freed himself from American slaveholders. In 1883, however, Douglass's objective was to broaden access for African Americans in order for them to benefit from and contribute to the nation. He thus inverted the revolutionary founder's call to arms, and implicitly shunned Henry's Antifederalist tendencies, to enhance his own argument for a strengthened Union that would protect the freedmen's rights.

Patrick Henry created another opportunity for Douglass in the 1880s: to honor the memory of John Brown and his 1859 attack on the federal arsenal at Harpers Ferry. Commemorating a man who had then committed a rebellious act while Douglass denounced the "Southern rebellion" required adroit handling of language and intent. In 1881, when Douglass published *Life and Times*, he also celebrated Brown's memory in a public address by linking Virginia's revolutionary past to Brown's actions. Douglass argued in his speech that Brown "had evinced a conception of the sacredness and value of liberty which transcended in sublimity that of her own Patrick Henry and made even his fire-flashing sentiment of 'Liberty or Death' seem dark and tame and selfish." Douglass continued: "Henry loved liberty for himself, but [Brown] loved liberty for all men."<sup>23</sup> Patrick Henry's desire for freedom as a slaveholder arose from others' labors and sufferings. On the other hand, John Brown took his place beside Douglass and his slave co-conspirators when they "did more than Patrick Henry" in attempting to rebel against institutions of oppression.

*Life and Times* more fully elaborated on Douglass's involvement with John Brown. The autobiography paid tribute to the man whom Douglass described as "the logical result of slaveholding persecutions." Douglass admitted that the "horrors wrought by his iron hand cannot be contemplated without a shudder," but given the rampant violence throughout the land, Brown was only a reckoning force within the overall storm, in which "necessity is a full justification of it to reason" (*LT*: 744). Thus rendered "logical" and justified by "reason," Brown could not necessarily be considered a madman or anarchist, considering the grander scale of destruction that the Civil War encouraged to end slavery.

At the same time, Douglass defended his own refusal to join John Brown's group based on stronger reasoning: Brown through his actions "was about to rivet the fetters more firmly than ever on the limbs of the enslaved" (*LT*: 760). In his ambivalent honoring of Brown's memory, Douglass assured his readers that he possessed more rational thinking because of the circumstances back then. Brown's attack would only incur the heightened wrath

<sup>23</sup> "Did John Brown Fail?" *The Frederick Douglass Papers*, 5: 22.

of whites against blacks. Mobs targeted Douglass as well as other black and white abolitionists especially after the Harpers Ferry episode. He then had to flee to England to ensure his safety, fearing arrest in connection with Brown's failed assault. In this respect, commemorating John Brown was a very problematic exercise since Douglass himself admitted that Brown's action, while seemingly logical in its impulsiveness, was still "an attack on the federal government, and would array the whole country against us" (*LT*: 759). Given Douglass's support of the Constitution as an antislavery document and his remembering of the Civil War from the standpoint of national reunion, the government and the Union itself could not be assaulted by its parts. Patrick Henry's defiance of the British Empire was then the only logical model for Douglass to apply in his tribute to John Brown.

To place Brown's actions in a better light, Douglass turned his attention to chastizing the South as a region overrun with destructive emotions. Earlier in the *Narrative* and *My Bondage and My Freedom*, Douglass attacked slavery by displaying the loss of reason and self-control on the part of slaveholders when they mercilessly flogged, raped, or killed their slaves. In a slave society, as Douglass warned in *My Bondage and My Freedom*: "Reason is imprisoned here, and passions run wild" (*BF*: 171). This interest in balancing reason and passion is also apparent in *The Federalist* and *Life and Times*. Both texts based several key points on the idea of faculty psychology in their concerns for uniting or reuniting a nation respectively. As Daniel Walker Howe observes, faculty psychology, or the study of a human nature divided into components of reflection and action, infused the thinking of the constitutional framers and Douglass among other figures throughout the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. This historical construct of "faculties" was understood, as Howe writes, through a hierarchy of importance, in which "[t]he moral and rational powers (because they partook of the divine nature) had precedence over emotional and instinctive impulses (animal powers)." <sup>24</sup> The ultimate ideal for human beings was to achieve a balanced character governed by universal laws, though with reason triumphing over emotion or passion. Any unruly passion called for regulation: internally within one's mind and body or externally through the broader systematic checks and balances of government. <sup>25</sup>

*The Federalist* drew on ancient, medieval, and modern ideas as well as historical experience that associated liberty with order. To James Madison, Alexander Hamilton, and John Jay – the writers known collectively as

<sup>24</sup> Daniel Walker Howe, *Making the American Self: Jonathan Edwards to Abraham Lincoln* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1997), 6. <sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*, 5–10, 78–90, 151–52.

Publius – an individual’s will had to focus on achieving a harmonic balance of faculties to maintain liberty, a psychological priority that translated as well into the political realm.<sup>26</sup> In *Federalist* Nos. 49 and 50, Madison discussed the contentiousness of parties. In the former document, he stated that if parties gained ascendancy, “The *passions* [and] ... not *the reason*, of the public, would sit in judgment.” “But it is the reason of the public alone,” he continued, “that ought to controul and regulate the government. The passions ought to be controuled and regulated by the government.”<sup>27</sup> Madison’s sentence structure itself disclosed his sense for balance and order, from which the public and the government offset each other’s limitations. In *Federalist* No. 55, he explained the proportional representation of voters through their elected officials: “[T]he number [of representatives] ought at most to be kept within a certain limit, in order to avoid the confusion and intemperance of a multitude. In all very numerous assemblies, of whatever characters composed, passion never fails to wrest the sceptre from reason.”<sup>28</sup> To Madison and others, the path to political order, stability, and eventual success lay in the supremacy of reason over passion.

*Life and Times* not only continued this line of thinking from Douglass’s two earlier autobiographies and *The Federalist* but also transmitted another message within the contexts of nation rebuilding. Answering the South’s appropriation of revolutionary legacies, Douglass placed its actions within the dreaded realm of unthinking passion. The episode of capturing and trying John Brown revealed to Douglass the South’s state of mind. “Virginia had satisfied her thirst for blood,” he wrote. “She had not given Captain Brown the benefit of a reasonable doubt, but hurried him to the scaffold in panic-stricken haste. She had made herself ridiculous by her fright and despicable by her fury” (*LT*: 763). To Douglass, the South had lost all signs of due deliberation. At the same time, he celebrated the Confederacy’s misguided fervor precisely because it led to the Civil War and the emancipation of slaves. “Happily for the cause of human freedom, and for the final unity of the American nation,” Douglass rejoiced, “the South was mad, and would listen to no concessions” to avoid war. As he continued from the safe distance of Northern victory: “This haughty and unreasonable and unreasoning attitude of the imperious South saved the slave and saved the nation” (*LT*: 771).

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*, 79.

<sup>27</sup> *The Federalist*, ed. Jacob E. Cooke (Middletown: Wesleyan University Press, 1961), 343.

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*, 374.

Douglass selectively inverted the concerns in *The Federalist* about provoking the destructive passions of the nation's citizens, inviting rather than condemning Southern irrationality since it ultimately meant the eradication of slavery. Abolitionists had differed among themselves about how the founders' legacies applied to the matter of secession. The more pacifist-oriented argued for letting the South leave the Union with their blessing, while others who advocated force ventured to distinguish between justified and illegitimate revolutions. To Douglass, the issue was crystal clear. As previously mentioned, the *Narrative* and *My Bondage and My Freedom* disclosed how the intemperate passions aroused by slavery made Southern masters resistant to rational behavior. In 1860, he wrote to *New York Tribune* editor James Redpath: "I have little hope of the freedom of the slave by peaceful means. A long course of peaceful slaveholding has placed the slaveholders beyond the reach of moral and humane considerations."<sup>29</sup> With the advent of war, he maintained that confronting these damaging emotions liberated not only slaves from slaveholders but also the Union from the bonds of its lesser faculties practiced by its lesser parts. The Civil War, as Douglass and other Northerners contended, acted as a corrective, terrible as it was, to the founders' quandary over slavery as well as to the South's insistence on continuing a morally corrosive institution that threatened the nation's well-being.<sup>30</sup>

## WE THE PEOPLE

Other challenges to Douglass's sense of self and mission emerged to complicate his role as an alternative founder to African Americans. With the adoption of the postwar amendments to the Constitution, he felt that to improve the fortunes of the freed people were tasks for the younger generations. Upon returning to Rochester, New York from Washington, DC, Douglass presented himself as a founding father in the mold of George Washington, with his plans for a contented retirement from public life. "I was not, however, to remain long in my retired home in Rochester," he noted, "where I had planted my trees and was reposing under their shadows" (*LT*: 836). This image of a "reposing" Douglass fits the pattern

<sup>29</sup> Frederick Douglass to James Redpath, 29 June 1860, quoted in *Frederick Douglass: Selected Speeches and Writings*, 396.

<sup>30</sup> George M. Fredrickson, *The Inner Civil War: Northern Intellectuals and the Crisis of the Union* (New York: Harper and Row, 1965), 56–64; Daniel J. McInerney, *Fortunate Heirs of Freedom: Abolition and Republican Thought* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1994), 127–47.



of Cincinnatus followed by the revolutionary fathers, Washington being the foremost example of one who retired to the peaceful bliss of his farm after public service. Urged by a presumably grateful nation, however, Douglass had to enter into the fray once more. Arriving back in Washington, DC, he helped establish a newspaper, the *New National Era*, “which should be devoted to the defence [*sic*] and enlightenment of the newly-emancipated and enfranchised people” (*LT*: 836). But in the style of Franklin’s errata in the *Autobiography*, Douglass admitted his mistake when the newspaper folded in 1874, costing him several thousand dollars as a result of his personal investment. Although justifying the expenditures to provide a forum for African Americans, Douglass sounded less hopeful about the experience as a whole.

Another misfortune, occurring in the same year as the failed newspaper, was Douglass’s disastrous involvement with the Freedmen’s Savings and Trust Company, where he served as a figurehead president. Similar to the newspaper venture, Douglass recounted in *Life and Times* placing his faith in an institution that would “instil [*sic*] into the minds of the untutored Africans lessons of sobriety, wisdom, and economy, and to show them how to rise in the world” (*LT*: 838). The bank represented for Douglass that ideal blend of industrious, self-reliant individuals practicing thrift and a stable institution that supported their efforts to attain financial and social respectability. Despite these noble intentions, the Freedmen’s Bank quickly became insolvent from speculative loans to corrupt firms and other risky ventures of which Douglass was unaware. Creating associations to uplift the race appeared more controversial and frustrating an endeavor than he had imagined.

New problems on the political front proved no less encouraging. With newly freed and enfranchised African Americans to incorporate into the body politic, Douglass set his sights to the task. Before then, he confessed to a moment of sadness, realizing the end of his antislavery fight: “I felt that I had reached the end of the noblest and best part of my life. ... The anti-slavery platform had performed its work, and my voice was no longer needed” (*LT*: 811). “Losing” his voice, one of his most powerfully effective tools, presented a crossroads between past and future opportunities for Douglass. He entertained the possibility of running for political office, but then decided against it, noting his own “problem of constituency,” as Kenneth Warren phrases it.<sup>31</sup> Douglass ironically realized his social and

<sup>31</sup> Kenneth W. Warren, “Frederick Douglass’s *Life and Times*: Progressive Rhetoric and the Problem of Constituency,” in *Frederick Douglass: New Historical and Literary Essays*, ed. Eric J. Sundquist (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990), 253–70.

linguistic distance from potential supporters among the black population. As he acknowledged in *Life and Times*:

I could not have readily adapted myself to the peculiar oratory found to be most effective with the newly-enfranchised class. ... I had acquired a style of speaking which in the South would have been considered tame and spiritless, and consequently he who 'could tear a passion to tatters and split the ear of groundlings' had far better chance of success with the masses there than one so little boisterous as myself. (*LT*: 835)

To develop Warren's point, I would suggest that Douglass's observation historically links to the hierarchy of faculties that he and the Constitution's framers followed in emphasizing reason over passion to preserve liberty. Those who "could tear a passion to tatters" threatened this political objective, one that only intensified Douglass's remoteness from his intended audience and the multiple possibilities of cultural expression. Here Douglass also unconsciously reflected the concerns of other postrevolutionary intellectuals about culture and social status. Such works as Royall Tyler's play *The Contrast* (1787) or Hugh Henry Brackenridge's novel *Modern Chivalry* (1792) satirically portrayed the democratic populace's apathy for establishing an enlightened republic of virtue. Like these earlier writers, Douglass could only wonder at the distance he had traveled in his life only to become so isolated from those he wanted to represent in the broadest sense.

As Douglass concluded the 1881 edition of *Life and Times*: "I have urged upon [the freedmen] self-reliance, self-respect, industry, perseverance, and economy" (*LT*: 914). Recalling Franklin as a particular model to follow, Douglass implicitly appropriated the founder's characteristics into his own experience influenced by race and slavery. Aware of the obstacles encountered by African Americans in the late nineteenth century, Douglass attempted to implement Franklin's plan for self-improvement, while criticizing the "power of superstition, bigotry, and priest-craft" among the freed populace (*LT*: 913). He continually expressed his disappointment in the freedmen while adhering to Franklin's Enlightenment beliefs in the universal laws of progress. Douglass could not bring himself to fault the ideals themselves, but his middle-class values of self-reliance, industry, and economy sounded hollow to many African Americans who required massive institutional aid. If the youthful Douglass ended the *Narrative* and *My Bondage and My Freedom* with the hope and possibilities of revolutions in the making, the older Douglass in *Life and Times* concluded with indeterminacy and alienation. "My views at this point," he sadly confessed, "receive[d] but limited endorsement among my people" (*LT*: 914).

Douglass half-heartedly admitted to failing in his mission, a feeling shared by other black and white Republicans who contested the nation's amnesia about the ideological causes of the Civil War. In his novel *A Fool's Errand* (1879), Albion Tourgée observed: "The South was right in believing that the North cared little or nothing for the [N]egro *as a man*, but wrong in the idea that the theory of political equality and manhood suffrage was invented or imposed from any thought of malice, revenge, or envy toward the South."<sup>32</sup> The author conceded that the racism of white Northerners did not make them the moral victors in the Civil War. What encouraged his dejected resolve for a newly reconstituted nation, however, was the hope that the enduring legacies of the revolutionary founders would eventually apply to all citizens regardless of race or region. Like Tourgée, Douglass voiced his disappointment at the process of national reunion, which increasingly left blacks at the mercy of preoccupied whites. "As the war for the Union recedes into the misty shadows of the past," Douglass declared in 1883, "and the Negro is no longer needed to assault forts and stop rebel bullets, he is in some sense, of less importance. Peace with the old master class has been war to the Negro. As the one has risen, the other has fallen."<sup>33</sup>

The course of nation rebuilding had been veering in foreboding directions even before Southern redemption. Between 1862 and 1872, the federal government spent millions of dollars and allotted over 100 million acres of land to railroad corporations. In a letter to Massachusetts Senator Charles Sumner, one black Texan, Anthony Wayne, forlornly noted this disparity between what the railroads and the freedmen received in assistance. If "Congress appropriated land by the million acres to pet railroad schemes," he asked, why "did they not aid poor Anthony and his people starving and in rags?"<sup>34</sup> Despite his own arguments on behalf of the freed populace, Douglass only partially realized what they faced during and after Reconstruction. He opposed the black Exodusters who migrated to Kansas during the 1870s to establish their own farms and escape the harsh toil and exploitation they encountered in the South. Douglass did not want African Americans to become refugees from the South, which he hoped would become more politically and socially amenable for the freedmen. A firm believer in the upward economic mobility of individuals, he also disagreed

<sup>32</sup> Albion Tourgée, *A Fool's Errand: A Novel of the South during Reconstruction* (New York: Harper and Row, 1966), 140.

<sup>33</sup> "The United States Cannot Remain Half-Slave and Half-Free," in *Life and Writings of Frederick Douglass*, 4: 355.

<sup>34</sup> Anthony Wayne quoted in Eric Foner, *Reconstruction: America's Unfinished Revolution, 1863–1877* (New York: Harper and Row, 1988), 467.

with black workers who formed their own labor unions. They were planning in part to deny organized political support to the Republicans should the party continue to undervalue their grievances. But Douglass saw this move toward labor organization as lending strength to white racist arguments that blacks were only good for manual work and little else. In the 1890s, as Douglass persisted in backing the Republicans, they in turn were busily exerting the nation's economic and political influence overseas while virtually ignoring the hundreds of lynchings and other forms of mob violence perpetrated against blacks in the South.<sup>35</sup>

These troubling contexts and the perceived distance Douglass felt from other African Americans continued in the 1892 revisions of *Life and Times*, in which he updated the events in his life. At one point, he noticed his economic separation from much of the black community. As Douglass explained: “[T]he notoriety [of wealth] foolishly or maliciously given me has, in some measure, placed me unfavorable before the people I have most endeavored to serve, and has naturally enough subjected me to some annoyances which I might otherwise have escaped” (*LT*: 956). Having fled from slavery, an established Douglass now yearned to evade his own fame. He recounted the multiple times poor blacks accosted him through correspondence for financial help, thinking him a possible benefactor. But Douglass saw the limits of what he actually could do to help: “Numerous pressing and pathetic appeals for assistance, written under the delusion of my great wealth, have come to me from colored people from all parts of the country, with heart-rending tales of destitution and misery, such as I would gladly relieve did my circumstances admit of it” (*LT*: 956–57). Douglass ended the chapter feeling that charlatans and the weak-willed predominated in their quest for aid and comfort. Without much direct admission, he revealed the weaknesses of the self-reliant ideal for African Americans in the late nineteenth century. He advocated the values of self-advancement not fully realizing the depths of racism and labor exploitation within the liberal capitalist system he embraced.<sup>36</sup>

### REENACTING LEGACIES

In *Life and Times*, Douglass intended to record not only his life story but also the successful agitation against slavery and the eventual freedom for

<sup>35</sup> McFeely, *Frederick Douglass*, 270–71, 299–302, 364.

<sup>36</sup> Blight, *Frederick Douglass's Civil War*, 189–218; Martin, *The Mind of Frederick Douglass*, 67–71, 125–33.

African Americans. He wanted to include his own roles and sufferings in the struggle for liberty within the larger “part of the history of a profoundly interesting period in American life and progress” (*LT*: 912). Indeed, he viewed the development of American society and culture as a series of progressive stages, extending ever upward for the betterment of humanity. But at times this long desired progress appeared ephemeral to him. In 1886, Douglass expressed his disappointment to the Presbyterian minister Francis J. Grimké, nephew of the famed abolitionist sisters Sarah and Angelina Grimké. “In regard to the cause of the colored people of this country,” he fretted, “I am feeling as deeply concerned for the future as ever. Violence and crime seem to run riot, and the press here [in Washington, DC] appear to delight in parading our offenses whenever committed or charged before the people of the Capital, thus strengthening opinion and sentiment against us as a class.”<sup>37</sup> In this postwar society, Douglass kept finding himself in a difficult position, one that only intensified his personal and professional disenchantment. As much as he tried to persuade African Americans to follow his lead, the white majority appeared ever more inclined to maintain its prejudices against the freed population.

By implicitly adapting the earlier patterns and ideals of nation building, Douglass inadvertently co-opted some of the broader, troubling legacies of the revolutionaries. Washington, Jefferson, Adams, and others felt that younger generations of Americans failed to appreciate past revolutionary achievements. As they aged, the founders became disillusioned about the directions in which their experiment in self-governance were heading. They sought to fashion ideal citizens in a republican polity, highlighting as well the need for educated elites who would have the public good in mind. But younger men of apparently questionable character were using the founders’ constitutional system to attain elected positions of power. Many others appeared too consumed by material gain, disregarding the efficacy of republican values. Not surprisingly then, the founders shunned the raucous, self-interested, and egalitarian society that emerged near the end of their lives, believing that their revolution went too far in unleashing the socially disruptive forces of democracy.<sup>38</sup>

Douglass felt similarly about his alienation from the black constituency in the late nineteenth century when it seemingly paid little heed to his hopes and intentions. Like the revolutionaries despairing over their failed

<sup>37</sup> Frederick Douglass to Francis J. Grimké, 19 Jan. 1886, quoted in *Frederick Douglass: Selected Speeches and Writings*, 695–96.

<sup>38</sup> Gordon S. Wood, *The Radicalism of the American Revolution* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1992), 365–68.

republican utopia, he could not control or foresee the multitude of problems that complicated his vision for a reconstructed nation. Unlike the founders though, he wholeheartedly supported a liberal market society in which anyone regardless of skin color ideally could achieve success and even prominence like him. Self-reliance and capitalism went hand in hand toward the progress of a democratic society. In contrast also to the revolutionaries' worries over the supposed excesses of democracy, Douglass thought the social reforms stemming from the considerable feats in ending slavery and reconstructing the nation never quite went far enough. He persistently championed a larger structural involvement from the federal government to provide better economic opportunities for the freedmen. But then, he could never resolve how his own advancement could present a model for a black community that appeared to him so distant in outlook, approach, and aspirations for material and political success. Douglass furthermore had to balance the freedmen's ambitions that differed from his own and the white population's resistance to accepting African Americans as fellow citizens. It is the sum of these enduring tensions – especially when read from the memories of revolution and nation building – that make *Life and Times* a compelling and significant work.