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Abstract:

In 1846-7 Frederick Douglass crossed the Atlantic on a tour of Britain and Ireland. He returned to the US a freed man, having had his manumission secured for £150, money raised by the Richardsons— a Quaker family of anti-slavery activists – in Newcastle upon Tyne. In speeches given on this tour he referred admiringly to Charles Dickens, his favourite author, and encouraged audiences to read Dickens's chapter on slavery in *American Notes* (1842). A little earlier, in 1844, Douglass had shared a stage with Emerson at an anti-slavery address in the US and he intersected with Emerson on the abolition circuit through shared acquaintances and friends and through print. Douglass was tracking what Emerson said about slavery in his diaries, while Emerson alluded to Douglass as 'the anti-slave' in his address on 'The Emancipation of the Negroes in the British West Indies' (1844), delivered in Concord. Offering a close examination of Douglass, Emerson, and Dickens, and their transatlantic exchange of ideas, I move away from the usual Anglo-American study of influence to offer

new readings of all three writers in an effort to reinstate the intricate interplay of transatlantic literary and cultural movements surrounding abolition. By foregrounding Douglass, my argument identifies new textual crossovers and transracial connections that can occur in the imaginative realm of literature, freed as it is, at least in part, from the oppressions of the world from which it is produced. I freshly situate all three writers in an inclusive triangulation, arguing that Douglass's writing transcends the limitations of his time, in which he imagines, as part of a transatlantic literary network, a radical vision of racial equality.

Keywords:

Frederick Douglass; Ralph Waldo Emerson; Charles Dickens; race; slavery; abolition; the Black Atlantic; self-reliance; the colour line; cross-racial literary alliance.

Word count: 9258

Title: Writing Across Lines: Frederick Douglass, Ralph Waldo Emerson and Charles Dickens in the Black Atlantic

On 20th February 1895 Frederick Douglass returned, somewhat exhausted, from a suffrage meeting of the National Council of Women in Washington, D.C., then collapsed and died, having suffered a suspected stroke. This final act of Douglass's life serves as a powerful reminder of his vigorous support for female suffrage throughout his career, as he campaigned for marginalised people until his final breath. He was the only African American attendee at The Seneca Falls Convention (1848), which provides another compelling illustration of the unusual ease with which Douglass could take up the cause of others' emancipation – in this case, that of mostly white women. Yet his treatment at the hands of white abolitionists when

on speaking tours, who encouraged the objectification of his black body for the scrutiny and titillation of white liberal audiences, demonstrates the impossibility of Douglass – an enslaved person until 1846 – ever crossing the colour line in everyday life in any meaningful way. Colour remained a barrier between him and his abolitionist supporters and the literary establishment throughout his career. His contemporary, Charles Dickens, suffered a similar death: he collapsed at home on 8th June 1870 after having a stroke, seemingly induced by overwork and his demanding schedule of public readings. He died the next day, aged 58. In his public readings, Dickens would return to famous scenes from the well-known novels, for example acting out Nancy’s murder from *Oliver Twist* (1837-9), with melodrama and conviction as though she were being killed there and then, before a live audience, by the brutishly violent Bill Sykes.¹ Dickens’s ability to embody another character empathetically extended from his fiction to his politics, where he was a notable supporter of women’s causes. His work founding the home for destitute women, Urania Cottage, as well as his efforts to include female writers such as Harriet Martineau and Elizabeth Gaskell in *Household Words* (1850-1859), are testament to the ways in which male writers of Dickens’s stature supported women and included female experience as part of their political and literary activities.² Ralph Waldo Emerson’s interest in female suffrage has been well documented, and scholars have traced his support for anti-slavery to his commitment to female suffrage at the source. The Seneca Falls Convention that Douglass attended was borne out of the experiences of Elizabeth Cady Stanton and Lucretia Mott, both acquaintances of Emerson’s, who were denied full participation at the World Anti-Slavery Convention in London in 1840

¹ For more on the theatre of Dickens’s performances, see Malcolm Andrews, *Charles Dickens and His Performing Selves: Dickens and the Public Readings* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006).

² Charles Dickens, *Household Words* (1850-1859), *Dickens Journals Online* <https://www.djo.org.uk/household-words.html>.

and who set off to form a similar conference for women in response. Emerson's support for female suffrage led him to anti-slavery, thanks to his local connections: all the Emerson women were members of Concord's Female Anti-Slavery Society and he signed the 'Declaration of Principles' put forth by the first National Women's Rights Convention held at Worcester, Massachusetts in 1850. In fact, Emerson's friend, Thoreau's sister Helen, was also a good friend of Douglass and she may have secured Douglass the invitation to speak alongside Emerson in 1844.³

While these writers were interested in the rights of women and in championing female causes – campaigns that shared synergies with the anti-slavery movement and, in some cases, anti-racism – the colour-line appears to have been harder for each of them to cross. It is not surprising, of course, that nineteenth-century writers should find themselves rigidly stuck on opposing sides of that line; as W.E.B. Du Bois later said, the 'problem of the Twentieth Century is the problem of the color-line'.⁴ The presence of that line, and the feeling of 'double-consciousness' it induced in people of colour, long outlived Douglass, Emerson, and Dickens, and in many respects it remains a problem in our own lives today, as illuminated globally by the Black Lives Matter protests of 2020.⁵ The further we look back over our shoulders and the closer we return to the history of slavery and the Atlantic slave trade, the

³ Len Gougeon has discussed the influence of Concord's Female Anti-Slavery Society on Emerson, and emphasises the important connections between Helen Thoreau, Emerson, and Douglass. See Len Gougeon, 'Militant Abolitionism: Douglass, Emerson, and the Rise of the Anti-Slave', *The New England Quarterly* 85, no. 4 (December 2012): 630.

⁴ W. E. B. Du Bois, *The Souls of Black Folk* ed. Brent Hayes Edwards (Oxford: Oxford University Press, [1903] 2008), 3.

⁵ Du Bois, *The Souls of Black Folk*, 8. For more on the relationship between Du Bois and Black Lives Matter see, Edlie Wong, 'Black Lives Matter, W. E. B. Du Bois's World Color Line, and the Question of Relation', *PMLA* 136, no. 3 (May 2021): 463 – 469.

more deeply manifest that line becomes. And yet, as I will show in this article, nineteenth-century writing in the Atlantic world does not always merely reflect the issues of its age as one might assume. Instead, at a fraught point in Anglo-American relations around the issue of slavery, it is capable of presenting an alternative approach to race-relations entirely. In his writing, reading, and connections with other writers, Douglass sought an imaginative literary space where the binary logic upon which racism relies might fall away, if only momentarily. By foregrounding Douglass, my argument identifies new textual crossovers that I will refer to as transracial. These transracial connections can only occur in the imaginative realm of literature, freed as it is, at least in part, from the oppressions of the world from which it is produced. At the biographical level, the lives of Douglass, Emerson, and Dickens illustrate flawed attempts at cross-racial collaborations, and Emerson's and Dickens's nineteenth-century racism (despite their anti-slavery efforts) prevented them from anything like a full communion with the racial other, while Douglass, of course, was held back from authentic cross-racial alliances in his lifetime by the system that enslaved him and by the racist legacies of that system. However, in pursuing an inclusive triangulation of these writers – an imaginative counterpoint to the horrific triangulation of the middle passage – I argue that Douglass's writing was both part of a transatlantic literary network and also able to transcend the limitations of its time, by proffering a radical vision of racial equality.

Dickens and Douglass: Writing about Slavery

Douglass was an avid reader with a broad literary appetite, though his favourite writer was unquestionably Charles Dickens.⁶ He was delighted with Dickens's *American Notes* (1842),

⁶ Celeste-Marie Bernier and Andrew Taylor eds., *If I Survive: Frederick Douglass and Family in the Walter O. Evans Collection* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2018), xxvi. Sincere thanks to Celeste-Marie Bernier for outlining to me Frederick Douglass's great interest in Dickens and for conjuring up, in our conversations, an

and told a British audience that they ‘must read the chapter on slavery in Dickens’s Notes on America’.⁷ It is not difficult to see why Douglass placed such significance on the chapter in which Dickens recorded visiting a Southern plantation and travelling in segregated carriages. His revulsion at the abject realities of slavery are overt when he analyses newspaper advertisements for the return of runaway slaves, which ubiquitously read “Cash for negroes,” “cash for negroes,” “cash for negroes”.⁸ Dickens recounts, in his usual ironic tone, how ‘protected’ slaves must be by abolitionist public opinion, when their ‘masters’ were happy to advertise long lists of the violence they had inflicted on those slaves, without any concern for personal repercussions or the risk that exposing slave-holding mistreatment might feed the abolitionist machine.⁹ What follows is a ‘catalogue’ of these newspaper advertisements, prefaced by Dickens highlighting that these men, women, and children were at the mercy of slave-owners who in no way feared public opinion, and that the volume of

inviting scene of Douglass, his wife and children, reading Dickens together as a family. Celeste’s guidance here has been significant, instructive, and inspiring.

⁷ Frederick Douglass, ‘An Appeal to the British People’, Reception Speech at Finsbury Chapel, Moorfield, England, May 12, 1846, in *Frederick Douglass: Selected Speeches and Writings*, ed. Philip S. Foner (Chicago: Lawrence Hill Books, 2000), 33; For more on *Martin Chuzzlewit* (1842-44) in this context see, Sean Purchase, ‘Speaking of them as a Body: Dickens, Slavery and *Martin Chuzzlewit*’, *Critical Survey* 18, no.1 (2006): 1-16.

⁸ Charles Dickens, *American Notes: For General Circulation*, eds. John S. Whitley and Arnold Goldman (Harmondsworth: Penguin, [1842]1972), 273.

⁹ Amanda Claybaugh has discussed this passage and notices how Dickens engages with ‘Southern newspapers [as] key texts that his own writings must defamiliarize.’ Claybaugh highlights Dickens’s anger at public opinion failing across the South by accepting the brutalities of slavery. For more on this and a comprehensive account of Dickens in America, see Amanda Claybaugh, ‘Toward a New Transatlanticism: Dickens in the United States’, *Victorian Studies* 48, no. 3 (Spring, 2006): 439-460.

runaway slaves countered the trope of the ‘grateful slave’.¹⁰ One might expect abolitionist discourse to include details of physical suffering, injury and abuses; the real giveaway, Dickens observes, was that slave-owners themselves freely described the violence they meted out on their ‘property’, without fear of social judgement or moral rebuke.

Listing the runaway slaves he had read about in the US newspapers, he notes that ‘others of the same nature continue to be published every day, in shoals.’ Here, abbreviated, is the list:

‘Ran away, Negress Caroline. Had on a collar with one prong turned down.’

‘Ran away, a black woman, Betsy. Had an iron bar on her right leg.’

‘Ran away, the negro Manuel. Much marked with irons.’

‘Ran away, the negress Fanny. Had on an iron band about her neck.’

‘Ran away, a negro boy about twelve years old. Had round his neck a chain dog-collar with “De Lampert” engraved on it.’

‘Ran away, the negro Hown. Has a ring of iron on his left foot. Also, Grise, *his wife*, having a ring and chain on the left leg.’

‘Ran away, a negro boy named James. Said boy was ironed when he left me.’

‘Committed to jail, a man who calls his name John. He has a clog of iron on his right foot which will weigh four or five pounds.’

‘Detained at the police jail, the negro wench, Myra. Has several marks of LASHING, and has irons on her feet.’

¹⁰ For more on the figure of the grateful slave in British and American culture see, George Boulukos, *The Grateful Slave: The Emergence of Race in Eighteenth-Century British and American Culture* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008).

‘Ran away, a negro woman and two children. A few days before she went off, I burnt her with a hot iron, on the left side of her face. I tried to make the letter M.’¹¹

Of all the disturbing imagery in the list, the last entry, a vignette of the slave master trying to inscribe a woman’s face with his own initial, has particular illustrative impact and affective force. And yet it is well known that slave-owners branded their slaves: the detail is sickening and also quotidian.¹² The list, in full, records thirty-five people: Henry, Pompey, Rachel, Sam, Dennis, Simon, Arthur, Issac, Mary, Ben, Tom, Ned, Josiah, Edward, Ellie, Randal, Bob, Tom, Anthony, Jim Blake, Maria, Mary, Fountain, Jim, John, ‘negro man’, Mary, Judy, Levi, Washington, John, Sally, Joe Dennis, Jack, Ivory, all with horrific injuries and mutilations. The sheer number and the variety of names (some biblical, some modern, one with no name at all) speaks to the near universality – in nineteenth-century black experience – of institutionalised, violent abuse. This was Dickens’s first concerted effort to speak for anti-slavery, and he would extend this criticism of the brutalities of slavery in the US into the last of his picaresque novels, *Martin Chuzzlewit* (1842-44).¹³

¹¹ Dickens, *American Notes*, 274.

¹² Frederick Douglass talked about slave branding in his lectures, explaining how slaves were ‘branded with red-hot irons, the initials of their master’s name burned into their flesh’. See Douglass, ‘An Appeal to the British People’, 33; Details of the address, ‘An Appeal to the British People’, given to 3000 people was published in Dickens’s journalistic venture the *Daily News*. Lawrence Fenton covers this and the talk more broadly in ‘*I Was Transformed*’: *Frederick Douglass An American Slave in Victorian Britain* (Stroud: Amberley Publishing, 2018), 106-110.

¹³ Critics such as Grace Moore have dealt with the question of Dickens’s reserve on the subject of US slavery. See Grace Moore, *Dickens and Empire: Discourses of Class, Race and Colonialism in the Works of Charles Dickens* (Surrey: Ashgate, 2004), 439-460.

Dickens corresponded with Harriet Beecher Stowe (the ‘little woman who wrote the book that started this great war’) about the plight of the enslaved.¹⁴ And, as his correspondence with Stowe illustrates, he was part of a vast literary and activist network of exchange that enabled him to think and write about slavery – the enslaving of African Americans, and the subjection of England’s poor – in the Atlantic world.¹⁵ His reading of the *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass* (1845), a first-person account from the slave’s perspective, gave Dickens unambiguous insight into what life might have been like for those branded, mutilated and abused people he had written about in *American Notes* and in *Martin Chuzzlewit*; reading Douglass’s *Narrative* informed his views on the institution as much as, if not more than, his visit to the US. As Julia Sun-Joo Lee has shown, the genre of the slave narrative connects with the Victorian novel in remarkable ways. Dickens’s *Great Expectations* (1861), for example, can be understood not just as a social commentary on England’s poor but also as a narrative with the runaway slave at the core of its fugitive narrative.¹⁶ At the start of *Great Expectations*, the convict who Pip encounters on the Kent marshes has just escaped from a prison ship. The runaway is starving and in chains. Here is the scene just before Pip is startled by the escaped Magwitch:

Ours was the marsh country, down by the river, within, as the river wound, twenty miles of the sea. My first most vivid and broad impression of the identity of things seems to me to have been gained on a memorable raw afternoon towards evening. At

¹⁴Abraham Lincoln referred to Stowe as the ‘woman who wrote the book that started this great war’. Joan D. Hedrick, *Harriet Beecher Stowe: A Life* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1994), vii.

¹⁵ Marcus Wood’s *Slavery, Empathy and Pornography* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002) deals in full with the transatlantic circulation of anti-slavery debates in the 1840s.

¹⁶Julia Sun-Joo Lee, *The American Slave Narrative and the Victorian Novel* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2010), 113-130.

such a time I found out for certain that this bleak place overgrown with nettles was the churchyard; and that Philip Pirrip, late of this parish, and also Georgiana wife of the above, were dead and buried; and that Alexander, Bartholomew, Abraham, Tobias, and Roger, infant children of the aforesaid, were also dead and buried; and that the dark flat wilderness beyond the churchyard, intersected with dikes and mounds and gates, with scattered cattle feeding on it, was the marshes; and that the low leaden line beyond was the river; and that the distant savage lair from which the wind was rushing was the sea; and that the small bundle of shivers growing afraid of it all and beginning to cry, was Pip.¹⁷

This frigid and dreary scene introduces readers to the hero of the bildungsroman, Pip, as he is surrounded by the dead, including his late parents and siblings. But, interestingly, their graves provide a sense of identity as Pip builds an imaginative picture of his deceased parents based solely on the characteristics of their headstones. The dead do not frighten Pip, but the sea does.¹⁸ The ‘dark flat wilderness’ leads to the sea, that ‘distant savage lair’ which is home to dangerous creatures: the convicts aboard a prison ship floating within sight. The desolate

¹⁷ Charles Dickens, *Great Expectations* ed. Margaret Cardwell (Oxford: Oxford University Press, [1861] 1993), 4.

¹⁸ Dickens was shaped by seafaring life, as John Peck as shown. Peck explains that Dickens’s father worked for the Navy Post Office at Portsmouth dockyards, that Dickens was born in Landport near Portsmouth where the family lived while he was a boy, and that he returned there when he was researching his semi-autobiographical novel *Nicholas Nickleby*. Peck writes, ‘John Dickens – not known for his straight dealings when it came to money – often paid sailors with handouts aboard ship in the dark which is an image that feels straight out of *Great Expectations*.’ John Peck, *Maritime Fiction: Sailors and the Sea in British and American Novels, 1719-1917* (Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2001), 70-71.

seascape frightens Pip to tears. It is made more terrible by the loud canon blasts emanating from the ship that will soon fire to signal Magwitch's and Compeyson's escapes.

Magwitch, like the runaway slaves that Dickens would record in *American Notes*, is also maimed. He has 'a great iron on his leg', he wears 'broken shoes', and he has been 'soaked in water, and smothered in mud, and lamed by stones, and cut by flints, and stung by nettles, and torn by briars'.¹⁹ His injuries are many and his suffering obvious. Read alongside the slavery chapter from Dickens's *American Notes*, the scene suggests Dickens was drawing connections between the English poor, always in close proximity to regimes of crime and punishment, and escaped slaves in the American South.²⁰ Later in the novel, Pip will worry about his own association with criminals and criminality and what might become of him when he steals the file and food for Magwitch, identifying with the convict's physical restrictions when he imagines the bread hidden in his trouser leg to be obstructive, like the leg iron that the convict wears.²¹ Pip the thief is the first focus of narrative empathy in *Great Expectations*. Dickens's sympathy extended to the runaway slaves he read and wrote about, too. In March 1848, he sent a copy of Douglass's *Narrative* to his friend the celebrated actor William Charles Macready.²² In turn, Dickens's writing was read and disseminated by Douglass. The Douglass family would spend evenings reading Dickens's novels together, and from April 1852 to the end of 1853 Douglass's anti-slavery newspaper *The North Star*

¹⁹ Dickens, *Great Expectations*, 4.

²⁰ For a brief overview of the taint of crime in *Great Expectations* see John Mullan, 'Crime in *Great Expectations*' 15 May 2017. *Discovering Literature: Romantics & Victorians* <https://www.bl.uk/romantics-and-victorians/articles/crime-in-great-expectations>.

²¹ For more on the connections between Magwitch, US slavery, and tobacco production see, Elaine Freedgood, *The Ideas In Things: Fugitive Meaning in the Victorian Novel* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2010), 83-111.

²² Fenton, *I Was Transformed*, 139.

published all of *Bleak House* in serialized instalments. These examples illustrate the promotion of Dickens's writing in an anti-slavery context and the circulation of Douglass's work by Dickens as part of a transatlantic dialogue about slavery and the abolitionist cause.²³

Atlantic Literary Connections and the Anti-Slavery Cause

Like Dickens, Emerson was initially reticent to express his support for the anti-slavery cause, but he did so eventually, and by 1860 he had secured a reputation as a key abolitionist thinker. His thinking on race evolved because of several influences. Particularly pronounced was his anger at the threat to civil liberties imposed by the Fugitive Slave Law, part of The Compromise of 1850.²⁴ He renounced Daniel Webster, a senator he had profoundly admired, for supporting that law, which marked a change in direction for Emerson. Finally, his support for John Brown after the Harpers Ferry Raid (1859) pushed Emerson closer to an abolitionist

²³ Elizabeth McHenry writes about the serialization of *Bleak House* in Douglass's newspaper. She explains the significance of presenting *Bleak House* in this anti-slavery paper, alongside journalistic reviews of the recently published *Uncle Tom's Cabin* (1852) and slave narratives, as Douglass's way of proving 'by association that this writing was equal and to insist, at the same time, that literary talent was transracial. In the juxtaposition of all of this literature—fiction about legal injustice in *Bleak House*, fiction about racial injustice in *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, and nonfiction about slave experience in the slave narratives—the newspaper's readers were able to see them as connected by theme (injustice) and in political intent (to reform the justice system, abolish slavery).' Elizabeth McHenry, *Forgotten Readers: Recovering the Lost History of African American Literary Societies* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2002), 126.

²⁴ Joel Porte has examined the 1850 Compromise as a turning point for Emerson's views on slavery; See *Emerson in His Journals* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1982), 363. Speaking about the Fugitive Slave Law, Emerson announced: 'this last year has forced us all into politics, and made it a paramount duty to seek what it is often a duty to shun. We do not breathe well. There is infamy in the air'. Ralph Waldo Emerson, 'Address to the Citizens of Concord' in *Emerson's Anti-Slavery Writings*, eds., Len Gougeon and Joel Myerson (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1995), 53.

and anti-slavery position. However, Dickens had a lifelong friendship with Emerson that endured across the Atlantic and over decades. This, and his intersections with Douglass on the abolitionist circuit and in print, were also factors affecting Emerson's change of heart over the slavery issue. Emerson met Dickens on his second British book tour (1847-8), and Dickens obtained a copy of Emerson's *Essays: First Series* (1841) quite soon after publication, when he was in the US in 1842. Dickens reviewed the volume positively and hinted at an affinity between them, writing in *American Notes*, 'if I were a Bostonian, I think I would be a Transcendentalist'.²⁵ Emerson wrote gushingly about Dickens's fiction in *English Traits* and he was thrilled to meet Dickens in 1848; the feeling was evidently mutual, as the friendship survived and they met again on Dickens's second American tour, in 1866, when he stayed in Boston and dined with Emerson.²⁶

Although Emerson did not enjoy the same friendship with Douglass, the two would cross on the lecture circuit and this seems to have had a profound impact on Emerson. When Emerson shared a stage with Douglass in Concord he was giving his first anti-slavery talk, 'The Emancipation of the Negroes in the British West Indies' (1844), in which he declared: 'here is the anti-slave: here is man: and if you have man, black or white is an insignificance'.²⁷ This statement seems to address Douglass directly, as Len Gougeon has

²⁵ Dickens, *American Notes*, 107; For a full account of Emerson's second British book tour see Daniel Koch, *Ralph Waldo Emerson in Europe: Class, Race and Revolution in the Making of an American Thinker* (London and New York: I.B. Tauris, 2012).

²⁶ Claire Tomalin, *Charles Dickens: A Life* (London: Penguin, 2001), 366. Douglass had also been hoping to meet with Dickens in 1847 when he invited Dickens to his 'Farewell to the British People' speech in London. Dickens's commitments at the time forced him to write to Douglass with apologies.

²⁷ Emerson knew of Douglass, personally, through his relationships with William Lloyd Garrison and Wendell Phillips who often visited Emerson in the 1840s and who each knew Douglass well. At the same time, Douglass tracked in his diaries what Emerson was saying about slavery and he praised Emerson's anti-slavery address

noticed, and elsewhere Hugh Egan refers to Douglass as the ‘self-reliant slave’.²⁸ Gougeon has done much to rehabilitate Emerson’s reputation as an anti-slavery writer, and I suspect he is correct to notice that Emerson alludes to Douglass here when he describes the ‘anti-slave’. Yet I read that reference somewhat less positively than Gougeon intends. Rather than an example of Emerson’s anti-slavery conviction, this is more accurately read, I think, as an example of Emerson’s inconsistency around the slavery issue and it seems no coincidence that he is at his most pronounced about anti-slavery when Douglass is watching from the sidelines. Yes, Emerson delivers several anti-slavery addresses in the 1840s and beyond, but he is simultaneously writing offensive entries in his journals like this one from 1854 (ten years after his ‘anti-slave’ proclamation): ‘the black man will only be destined for museums like the Dodo’.²⁹ This is not an isolated incident. In 1840 he had written: ‘Strange history this of *abolition*. The negro must be very old & belongs, one would say, to the fossil formations. [...] It is plain that so inferior a race must perish shortly like the poor Indians.’³⁰ The overt, grotesque racism in this journal entry makes for uncomfortable reading, but Emerson rarely attempted publicly to hide such views and in fact they can be heard clearly in his published essays. Take this, for example, from ‘Self-Reliance’ (1841):

‘The Emancipation of the Negroes in the British West Indies’ in the *Frederick Douglass Paper* (1855). These connections are noted in Gougeon, ‘Militant Abolitionism’: 622-657; Ralph Waldo Emerson, ‘Address On Emancipation In the British West Indies’ August 1844 in *Emerson’s Anti-Slavery Writings*, eds., Len Gougeon and Joel Myerson (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1995), 31.

²⁸ Hugh Egan, “‘On Freedom’: Emerson, Douglass, and the Self-reliant Slave”, *ESQ: A Journal of the American Renaissance*, 60, no.2 (2014): 183.

²⁹ Ralph Waldo Emerson, *The Journals and Miscellaneous Notebooks*, ed. William H. Gilman et al. 16 vols. (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1960-1982), 13:286.

³⁰ Emerson, *The Journals and Miscellaneous Notebooks*, 7:393 (Emerson’s italics).

If an angry bigot assumes this bountiful cause of Abolition, and comes to me with his last news from Barbadoes, why should I not say to him, ‘Go love thy infant; love thy wood chopper: be good-natured and modest: have that grace; and never varnish your hard, uncharitable ambition with this incredible tenderness for black folk a thousand miles off. Thy love afar is spite at home.’³¹

This denial of the social responsibility that slavery imparted to every citizen of the United States – muffled in an infantilised instruction to be ‘good’ at home, and not show concern for man’s inhumanity to man abroad for fear that love would not stretch to both the domestic and the public – exemplifies Emerson in his least progressive moments of argument.

Douglass seems to have forgiven Emerson for his earlier racist writing in favour of promoting him as an ally for the cause as Emerson’s anti-slavery work grew and developed. By 1862, Douglass could cite Emerson as having sympathetic, abolitionist opinions: ‘Washington has become [...] the grand centre for abolition meetings [...] Dr. Cheever, Ralph Waldo Emerson. Gerrit Smith, Wendell Phillips, William Goodell and William Lloyd Garrison may now utter in safety their opinions on slavery in the national capital.’³² Douglass’s positioning of Emerson here, next to famous abolitionists, compellingly demonstrates how far Emerson’s views (and reputation) had shifted by the early 1860s. If crude racial discrimination marks his writings persistently during the 1840s, despite his anti-slavery addresses, then a deep shift in Emerson’s rhetoric and political conviction had taken place by the late 1850s. In 1859, when John Brown was awaiting execution for his infamous

³¹ Ralph Waldo Emerson, ‘Self-Reliance’, in *The Collected Works of Ralph Waldo Emerson*, 10 vols. (1841; Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1971-2013), 2:30.

³² Frederick Douglass, ‘The War and How to End It’, Address Delivered at Corinthian Hall, Rochester, New York, March, 25, 1862. In *Frederick Douglass Selected Speeches and Writings*, 491.

Harpers Ferry raid, Emerson gave a remarkable speech in support of the prisoner. In this speech, 'To Aid John Brown's Family', Emerson called for some practical assistance: 'I hope then that on administering relief to John Brown's family, we shall remember all those whom his fate concerns, all who are in sympathy with him, and not forget to aid him'.³³ The way to support Brown became pragmatic, and in effect Emerson had become an active abolitionist. The *National Anti-Slavery Standard* described him a little earlier in 1855 as 'no more a philosopher, but a practical man.'³⁴ His attitudes to race were complex, and until now scholars have mostly accounted for the dramatic change in Emerson's outlook as social drift aggravated by the 1850 Compromise. But the 1850 Compromise had not unsettled or upset Emerson sufficiently to temper his racist journal entries as late as 1854. Certainly, the Compromise was an atrocity to Emerson, but his move away from white superiority to abolitionist campaigning can be explained as part of a three-way story of interlocking literary and political influence, that included his associations with Douglass and Dickens, mapped across the Atlantic World.

Douglass in 'No-Place'

Any cross-racial alliance in action, as opposed to the symbiotic connections happening at a textual level between these writers, can be problematically white-washing and racist by default, as we see with Emerson's inconsistent attitudes about race. In the nineteenth century, any effort to see beyond racist binaries in life was hindered by systemic slavery and its legacies, and attempts at cross-racial connections continually fell short, as in the example of Emerson shows. Douglass certainly felt this on the abolitionist circuit when he called out

³³ Ralph Waldo Emerson, 'To Aid John Brown's Family' (18 November 1859), in *Emerson's Anti-Slavery Writings*, eds., Len Gougeon and Joel Myerson (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1995), 120.

³⁴ Quoted in Gougeon, 'Historical Background', *Emerson's Antislavery Writings*, xliii-xliv.

those white abolitionists who, in attempting to show the full humanity of black people, would ironically treat Douglass like a ‘thing’. Douglass writes about this in *My Bondage and My Freedom* (1855), where he discusses his experiences on stage at lectures and talks, his black body now directly publicly objectifiable for his audiences: ‘I was generally introduced as “chattel” – a “thing” – a piece of Southern “property” – the chairman assuring the audience that it could speak.’³⁵ This is an important reminder of the impossibility of an authentic coalition for freedom across the colour line when one race is subjugated. Douglass knew this only too well. But he would come to realise that literature offered a place to connect and meet across that line in ways denied him in real life, despite his flourishing celebrity status on both sides of the Atlantic.

During his long career Douglass gave over two thousand speeches and he has been described as the ‘greatest American orator of his time’.³⁶ The transatlantic dimension of his celebrity was especially important because much of his literary and political development occurred outside the United States. Douglass’s speeches and lectures created a sensation in Britain and Ireland as well as in the US.³⁷ Abraham Lincoln may have credited Harriet Beecher Stowe with ‘starting the great war’, but more than any other African American figure, Douglass helped to bring an end to slavery (particularly by encouraging African Americans to join the Union army). It was an English Quaker family, the Richardsons, who bought Douglass his freedom in Newcastle upon Tyne, sending him back to the US in 1847 as a free man, in a country that would continue to enslave people like him for another

³⁵ Frederick Douglass, *My Bondage and My Freedom*, in *The Oxford Frederick Douglass Reader*, ed. William L. Andrews (New York: Oxford University Press, 1996), 213.

³⁶ Yuval Taylor, ‘Introduction’, in *Frederick Douglass: Selected Speeches and Writings*, xi.

³⁷ For more on Douglass in Ireland see Fionnghuala Sweeney’s excellent account in *Frederick Douglass and the Atlantic World* (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2007) and Hannah-Rose Murray’s comprehensive website: <http://frederickdouglassinbritain.com>.

eighteen years.³⁸ Douglass's years in Ireland and Britain made possible the idealistic thinking that he took back to the US. His experiences on this side of the Atlantic helped to reaffirm his emancipatory ideals and ground his vision of equality. Douglass engaged with what Paul Gilroy has called an Atlantic 'counterculture of modernity', which allowed him to experience the treatment of race beyond the boundaries of the nation, and in turn to approach American race relations through the prism of much wider experience.³⁹ Only by recognising his status as an Atlantic World writer, speaker, and public figure, rather than as an African-American slave, can we grasp his message about black freedom. But this elsewhere of the Atlantic World is problematic, too, because it relegates Douglass to a position outside or beneath national belonging, in effect exiling him in a liminal space. Douglass's life and speeches were situated in these in-between places: between the US, Britain and Ireland, between slavery and freedom, between black experience and white experience. As a result of this liminality he acquired an incongruous double-identity which allowed him to see beyond the divisive racial binaries of his own epoch and to move toward a transracial imagining in his literary work, as I will go on to show.

Despite the psychological fracturing that is induced by double-identities, as first articulated by Du Bois in 1903, and then developed by Gilroy in his pioneering books *The Black Atlantic: Modernity and Double Consciousness* (1993) and *There Ain't No Black in the Union Jack: The Cultural Politics of Race and Nation* (1987), Leslie Eckel has written about

³⁸ Brian Ward recounts Douglass's words to a cheering crowd in Newcastle upon Tyne in December 1846, just weeks after his manumission: 'Newcastle had a heart that could feel for three millions of oppressed slaves in the United States.' See Brian Ward, 'Frederick Douglass: the ex-slave and transatlantic celebrity who found freedom in Newcastle', *The Conversation*, February 21, 2018, <http://theconversation.com/frederick-douglass-the-ex-slave-and-transatlantic-celebrity-who-found-freedom-in-newcastle-90886>.

³⁹ Paul Gilroy, *The Black Atlantic: Modernity and Double Consciousness* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1993), 37.

the freedom that Douglass managed to find in this in-between state. ‘When [Douglass] is “out of place”, he occupies that utopian “no-place” that allows for the kind of personal and collective liberation that leads to progress,’ Eckel argues.⁴⁰ The ‘no-place’ that he appears to occupy allows him to think differently about race and about himself, and touring Britain and Ireland gave rise to utopian possibility in this qualified sense. In this undecided zone, his abolitionist convictions found their form. But to exist in a ‘no-place’ is to be nowhere at all, and Douglass certainly felt the loss at being nowhere in a way that should remind readers of Du Bois’s and Gilroy’s concerns about black experience. Douglass writes about entering a free state having escaped to ‘freedom’ in New York in 1838. Arriving in New York notionally ‘free’ brought deep alienation, as he records in the *Narrative* (1845):

I was again seized with a feeling of great insecurity and loneliness [...] the loneliness overcame me. There I was in the midst of thousands, and yet a perfect stranger; without home and without friends, in the midst of thousands of my own brethren—children of a common Father, and yet I dared not to unfold to any one of them my sad condition [...] The motto which I adopted when I started from slavery was this—“Trust no man!” I saw in every white man an enemy, and in almost every colored man cause for distrust. It was a most painful situation; and, to understand it, one must needs experience it, or imagine himself in similar circumstances. (p.93)

This sense of homelessness – that is to say, homelessness at home – would, I expect, have been exacerbated further when he was away from home, in Britain and Ireland, and touring

⁴⁰ Leslie Eckel, ‘Crosscurrents of Black Utopianism: Martin R. Delany’s and Frederick Douglass’s Countercultural Atlantic’ in *The Edinburgh Companion to Atlantic Literary Studies*, eds. Leslie Elizabeth Eckel and Clare Frances Elliott (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2016), 133.

with white abolitionists as a celebrated speaker. Yet, what appears here as painful alienation would morph into a theory about racial equality and brotherhood across racial divides that found a home on the page, in writing, if not in Douglass's lived experience.

Writing and Righting the Middle Passage

Douglass understood that the alienating yet freeing power of such a 'no-place' between black and white experience might be extended to the realm of the literary imagination. He acted out that imaginative rebellion in his successful autobiographies, retelling the story of his physical victory over Covey in the form of narrative literature and repeating that rebellion through the pen with new emancipatory force. The power of the autobiographies to affect audiences and change perceptions of slavery, and even to transform the slave system, helps explain why slaveholders and their supporters continually dismissed Douglass's life-writing as fiction in an effort to undermine its power. But fiction and imaginative writing were precisely where Douglass's literary rebellion reached its zenith. His only fictional piece was published alongside a poem by Emerson in Julia Griffiths's fund-raising collection of writing, *Autographs for Freedom* (1853-4).⁴¹ The volumes were used to raise money for the anti-slavery cause, with writers donating pieces alongside their autographs. Douglass contributed his novella 'The Heroic Slave' (1853) and Emerson published the poem 'On Freedom' (1854) in the second volume. Douglass's story, 'The Heroic Slave' involves the fictional retelling of an actual slave revolt aboard the American ship *Creole* in 1841, and shows how Douglass understood that 'thought and action outside national boundaries ultimately

⁴¹ Julia Griffiths, ed., *Autographs for Freedom* (Boston: John P. Jewett and Company, 1853-4). <https://publicdomainreview.org/collection/autographs-for-freedom-1853>.

counteract the deficits of the culture that has developed within their limits,' as Eckel puts it.⁴² In this case, the support for slavery on land in the US dissolves away when the enslaved and slavers encounter the salt water of the Atlantic, opening up a freer space where enslaved people might overpower those who keep them captive without the threat of 'the sympathy of the community, and the whole physical force of the government, State and national [to contend with].'⁴³ Dickens had highlighted the power of the 'sympathy of the community' in *American Notes*, where he criticised the communities who consumed daily newsprint accounts of abused slaves and were complicit in that abuse through silent inaction.

Building on Eckel's reading of Douglass's story, I want to suggest that just as the Atlantic acts as a freer space than land where slaves might revolt, similarly the space of fiction itself bestows freedom from the 'whole physical force of the government' and other ideological forces that the salt-water dissolves. The story becomes the place where the imaginative revolt occurs. Hugh Egan deals with Emerson's contribution to *Autographs* in a similar way. 'On Freedom', he suggests, is a 'conflicted meditation on the power of verse to convey "freedom's secret" to the captive slave'. The poem is the place where a slave revolt, of sorts, might occur with imaginative and/or real consequences.⁴⁴ Literature is, unfortunately, a place where racist ideologies might be damagingly and enduringly enshrined in print, as Stowe's *Uncle Tom's Cabin* (1852) and later minstrel adaptations show only too clearly. But it is also the place where writers transcend racial division to deny racist thinking, and this endures too. W.E.B. Du Bois recognised that one might be saved from the evils of

⁴² Leslie Eckel, *Atlantic Citizens: Nineteenth-Century American Writers at Work in the World* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2013), 71-99.

⁴³ Eckel, *Atlantic Citizens*, 71.

⁴⁴ Egan, "'On Freedom": Emerson, Douglass, and the Self-reliant Slave', 2.

racism by sighting ‘the Promised Land’ in imaginative writing where race stops being a defining feature. Recall this famous passage from *The 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. From out the caves of evening that swing between the strong-limbed earth and the tracery of the stars, I summon Aristotle and Aurelius and what soul I will, and they come all graciously with no scorn nor condescension. So, wed with Truth, I dwell above the Veil. Is this the life you grudge us, O knightly America? Is this the life you long to change into the dull red hideousness of Georgia? Are you so afraid lest peering from this high Pisgah, between Philistine and Amalekite, we sight the Promised Land?⁴⁵

As author and reader, Du Bois dwells ‘above the veil’ in a transracial imaginary where the ‘Truth’ of equality is clearly perceived. In the imaginative ‘no-place’ of this dreamed-up literary landscape, Du Bois communes freely with Shakespeare, Balzac, and Dumas.⁴⁶ Likewise, Douglass felt that Dickens sat figuratively alongside fugitive slaves in *American Notes*, in a powerful display of cross-racial kinship at a time when white Southern society normalised the branding and mutilation of black faces and bodies.

Douglass placed himself on the page alongside Emerson by reimagining one of Emerson’s best-known passages of prose. In ‘Self-Reliance’ and accompanying essays,

⁴⁵ Du Bois, *The Souls of Black Folk*, 76. Thanks to Bridget Bennett for reminding me of this passage in Du Bois and for reading an earlier draft of this article, providing invaluable feedback and insights. Thanks, too, to Kristen Treen who also read an earlier draft of this and gave generous feedback and careful advice.

⁴⁶ For a good account of the relationship between Du Bois and Emerson see Brian A. Bremen, ‘DuBois, Emerson, and the “Fate” of Black Folk’, *American Literary Realism*, 1870-1910, 24, no.3 (Spring, 1992): 80-88.

Emerson had attempted to construct a new American literature free from the constraints of European literary conventions. His writing and speeches would offer the US its own intellectual freedom, and therefore it is fitting that Douglass chose Emerson to connect with on the page. Douglass's talk 'Self-Made Men', first delivered in 1859, is powerfully reminiscent of Emerson's style and thought. In it Douglass writes:

Properly speaking, there are in the world no such men as self-made men. That term implies an individual independence of the past and present which can never exist [...] I believe in individuality, but individuals are, to the mass, like waves to the ocean. The highest order of genius is as dependent as the lowest. It, like the loftiest waves of the sea, derives its power from the grandeur and vastness of the ocean of which it forms a part. We differ as the waves, but are one as the sea.⁴⁷

When a nineteenth-century former slave draws metaphorically on the ocean, as Douglass does so pointedly here, an allusion to Atlantic slavery is inescapably part of the signifying field. Imagining individuals as part of a vast watery network emphasizes interdependence in society at large. By situating the individual in this watery metaphor, Douglass supposes some unity, and equality, to be possible in the oceanic space, as the waves fall and merge with the sea. Black and white comingle in this image that ultimately refuses racial separation and insists on collective responsibility. The ghosts of the middle passage haunt the extract, where Douglass makes claims about social interconnectedness and inseparable bodies. 'We differ as waves, but are one as the sea', he insists. With those words, organised by that first encompassing personal pronoun, he locates the reader in the Atlantic, alongside the dead and

⁴⁷ Frederick Douglass, 'Self-Made Men' in *The Speeches of Frederick Douglass: A Critical Edition*, eds. John R. McKivigan and Julie Husband (Yale University Press, 2018 [1893]), 419-420.

dying Africans thrown overboard on countless transatlantic crossings. On this reading, the reality of those who suffered and died in the middle passage is not a voyeuristic fascination, but a collective trauma that ties together readers of all races, nationalities, and times. Any reference to the ocean that Douglass made would always allude to the Atlantic, but this passage also responds directly to Emerson's writing in a way that offers a perspective on Emerson's distinctive celebration of the individual and the group. Douglass is in dialogue with Emerson here, and his writing seeks to modify some points Emerson had made – about individual and collective responsibility – in 'Self-Reliance'.

Douglass's point that individuals depend on one another, and cannot be separated from the ocean of society, subtly re-engages the Emerson text:

Society is a wave. The wave moves onward, but the water of which it is composed does not. The same particle does not rise from the valley to the ridge. Its unity is only phenomenal. The persons who make up a nation to-day, next year die, and their experience with them.⁴⁸

Douglass undoes Emerson's image, by arguing against it. Douglass's water is uniting – the parts cannot be separated – whereas the union of water in Emerson's 'Self-Reliance' is illusory. Emerson's wave, representing society here, is, after all, just a collection of particles gathered together. Emerson's striking reading of the illusion of waves (that their movement does not, in fact, represent the motion of the particles that compose it) suggests that society is an illusion too. Douglass, of course, would not recycle such an irresponsible idea. Instead, he rewrites it, inverting the images of the wave and the ocean, creating a unifying metaphor to remind readers of humanity's unbreakable bonds. Black and white find themselves co-

⁴⁸ Emerson, 'Self-Reliance', 49.

mingling in the watery middle-passage in Douglass's retelling. In this transracial imaginary the trauma of the middle passage becomes the responsibility of all readers to confront. In Dickens, as I have shown, the sea can pose a hostile threat, ready to expel runaways from prison ships and catapult them, and their violence, into the lives of poor boys.⁴⁹ In Emerson, the sea is a harsh reminder of the impossibility of social collaboration: its wave an illusion. But, in Douglass, the reverse occurs: the bloodied waters of the middle passage offer the promise of collective union, if that trauma is confronted by all. Caryl Phillips, the contemporary novelist and non-fiction writer, who writes about the experiences of the black diaspora, often uses watery metaphors in his work, as when responding to critics who have asked him about missing homelands in his fiction: 'I wish my ashes to be scattered in the middle of the Atlantic Ocean, at a point equidistant between Britain, Africa and North America.'⁵⁰ This point, in the middle of the triangle forever associated with the Atlantic slave trade, seems a fitting resting place for Phillips whose personal geography has been similarly triangular: born in St. Kitts, raised in Leeds, and currently living in the US. This would have been a fitting place for Douglass's ashes to have been scattered, too, to reflect his indissoluble tie with slavery and also to reflect his inability ever to separate the slave from his own identity, even after his manumission. It is curious that Phillips would want to return to that point where Africans were killed and discarded as a posthumous homecoming, though if we consider it as also a symbolic space called the Atlantic World (the space where textual and cultural exchange happens and transatlantic creative energies meet, deliberate, and

⁴⁹ Of course, Douglass's claim in this essay, that 'there are no such men as self-made men' reminds readers of Dickens's Pip who is arguably English literature's most famous failed self-made man. A lesson of *Great Expectations* is that a gentleman is not someone 'made' in the material sense, at all, as Pip finally comes to recognise that the man of worth in the story is the lowly blacksmith, Joe, who has been there, at home, the whole time.

⁵⁰ Caryl Phillips, *A New World Order: Selected Essays* (London: Seeker & Warburg, 2001), 304.

develop), then it becomes easier to grasp why Phillips longs to return to it. This symbolic site in the middle of the Atlantic has much in common with what Homi Bhabha names the ‘Third Space’: the in-between space that ‘carries the burden of the meaning of culture’. By exploring this Third Space, Bhabha suggests, ‘we may elude the politics of polarity and emerge as the others of our selves.’⁵¹ In this sense, we might think of that spot in the middle of the Atlantic Ocean as calling Phillips back because it represents a ‘Third Space’ or what I have been describing as a ‘no-place’ of the imagination, which allows for the kind of ‘personal and collective liberation that leads to progress’, in Eckel’s phrase.⁵²

Such imaginative space, unbound from national constraints, is also, of course, situated in the imaginative landscape that is the literature of the Atlantic World. Du Bois would go on to articulate racial freedom in literary terms in *The Souls of Black Folk* (1903). But Douglass did so much earlier in his retelling of Emerson’s ‘Self-Reliance’ where the conscious literary reworking presents readers with a transracial experience that returns to the middle passage and reclaims its history for all races to acknowledge and confront. There, as Douglass wrote, we are ‘one as the sea.’⁵³ In rewriting Emerson’s famous essay, Douglass enters a version of Bhabha’s Third Space. He immerses himself in the waters of ‘Self-Reliance’, and in a baptismal metaphor the original Emerson text is transformed, or reborn, in the process.

⁵¹ Homi K. Bhabha, *The Location of Culture* (London: Routledge, 1994), 56. Yogita Goyal has written about Phillips’s postcolonial hybridity and his desire for a ‘watery grave in the middle of the Atlantic Ocean’ in *Romance, Diaspora, and Black Atlantic Literature* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 205.

⁵² Eckel, ‘Crosscurrents of Black Utopianism’: 133.

⁵³ Douglass, ‘Self-Made Men’, 420; Cristina-Georgiana Voicu has noticed that the ‘image of the “Black Atlantic” is at once a metaphoric substitution, an illusion of presence and by that same token a metonym, a sign of its absence and loss.’ I’ve argued here that Douglass writes in a transracial imaginary that moves beyond that absence and loss. Cristina-Georgiana Voicu, *Exploring Cultural Identities in Jean Rhys’ Fiction* (Warsaw: De Gruyter Open Ltd.), 39.

Douglass revises while revisiting the Emerson text, rising from the ocean of the imagined middle passage as the other of himself, in Bhabha's phrase – in this case, a black Emerson. As it merges with 'Self-Reliance', Douglass's 'Self-Made Men' overcomes the racist binaries of lived experience in a fundamentally transracial gesture. He rewrites the horrors of the middle passage as a new and inclusive vision of racial equality. Douglass's black experience unroots him from any one homeland. By positioning Emerson and Dickens around the central figure of Douglass, disclosing a triangular pattern of literary sympathies and kinships, I have loosed all three from fixed geographical sites in pursuit of a better understanding of the complex system of nineteenth-century networks of literary and intellectual exchange in the Atlantic world. In consequence, their contributions to nineteenth-century debates about slavery and race emerge more clearly, as does their role in spurring on abolition in the US. They simultaneously aggravated, modified, tempered, and encouraged one another in abolition. The literary genres each adopted (essays, fiction, autobiography, poetry, oration) contributed to the reach of anti-slavery discourse, and eventually abolitionist campaigning cut across race, nationality, and genre. As I have shown, reading Douglass, Emerson, and Dickens as part of this Atlantic network bears significant fruit in the analysis of their writing and influence. They connected in inclusive ways, not just in expected hierarchical patterns. Attempting this triangulation – which encompasses their literary sympathies and activism efforts – reveals, too, the imaginative project of emancipating thought from binary racist divisions that Douglass wanted to achieve, in specifically literary terms.

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