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Frederick Douglass has a strange way of describing what he feels like when he feels most free. When trying to convey how ardently enthusiastic he was when he first lived among abolitionists, he writes, “For a time I was made to forget that my skin was dark and my hair crisped” (Douglass 366). He echoes this expression of elation and lost self-consciousness when he writes about why he loves living in England: “I meet nothing to remind me of my complexion” (Douglass 374). Douglass was born into a racist society, and it is natural and perhaps inevitable that losing the awareness and memory of his body should be a freeing feeling for him; but when this feeling is described in a work of propaganda so carefully constructed as My Bondage and My Freedom, the reader expects it to be interpreted so as to fit with a larger message that there is nothing intrinsically imprisoning about dark skin and “crisped” hair, and Douglass refuses to interpret it in this way. To Douglass, the feeling of freedom seems to be uncomfortably close to the feeling of being invisible-or white.

I do not pretend to be able to ease the discomfort that Douglass creates in modern readers when he describes the pleasure of losing awareness of his hair and skin, but I believe these readers can understand Douglass better if they read his descriptions of transcendence of race in My Bondage and My Freedom as in part a reaction to the racialist attitudes towards individuals and cultures that prevailed in antebellum culture, including abolitionist culture. In the first two parts of this essay, “‘The African Race Has Peculiarities’: Transcending a Racialized Body,” and “‘A Little of the Plantation Manner’: Transcending a Racialized Culture,” I will describe how the racialism in Harriet Beecher Stowe’s Uncle Tom’s

Cabin and in the Garrisonian abolitionists' expectations for black abolitionists constrained Douglass in a way that was analogous to slavery.

Any attempt to free people from a bondage based on racial identity by an appeal to a liberating discourse which is also based on racial identity is bound to be problematic; as Robyn Wiegman writes, "If identities are not metaphysical, timeless categories of being; if they point not to ontologies but to historical specificities and contingencies; if their mappings of bodies and subjectivities are forms of and not simply resistances to practices of domination-then a politics based on identity must carefully negotiate the risk of reinscribing the logic of the system it hopes to defeat" (Wiegman 6). My claim about My Bondage and My Freedom, put into anachronistic terminology, is that Douglass felt that the politics of racist abolitionism did not negotiate the risk of reinscription carefully enough; furthermore, he did not believe it was possible for identity politics to avoid reinscribing the logic of slavery.

Douglass's desire for transcendence was not simply a reaction to racialism. It can also be understood as a positive expression of what he desired for himself and for African-Americans generally: a desire historically described as "assimilationism" and now pejoratively referred to as "universalism" or "bourgeois liberalism"; a desire that is evoked by Martin Luther King's mythical phrase about children who are judged "by the content of their character rather than the color of their skin." In the third part of this essay, "Race is Transient': Transcending Race," I discuss how Douglass, in a strangely postmodernist-yet-universalist way, deconstructs race in order to make assimilation possible. In My Bondage and My Freedom and in countless speeches, Douglass describes the racial self-designations and un-self-designations he makes when traveling on trains (following Douglass's lead, both the Supreme Court and W.E.B. Du Bois have at times recognized trains to be an ultimate test of the validity of racial identities). These designations and undesignations are breathtaking examples of an American's willful transcendence of race.

In these eventful train-rides, Douglass seeks to “disencumber” himself of the “corporeal maledictions” of race described by Saidiya Hartman: The universality or unencumbered individuality of liberalism relies on tacit exclusions and norms that preclude substantive equality; all do not equally partake of the resplendent, plenipotent, indivisible, and steely singularity that it proffers. Abstract universality presumes particular forms of embodiment and excludes or marginalizes others. Rather, the excluded, marginalized, and devalued subjects that it engenders, variously contained, trapped, and imprisoned by nature’s whimsical apportionments, in fact, enable the production of universality, for the denigrated and deprecated, those castigated and saddled by varied corporeal maledictions, are the fleshy substance that enable the universal to achieve its ethereal splendor. (Hartman 122)

Like Hartman, Douglass recognizes that certain kinds of embodiment preclude universality. But whereas Hartman’s response to this recognition is to reject universalism, Douglass’s response is to (try to) transcend “nature’s whimsical apportionments.”

Hartman’s claim that a universalist ideal can both coexist with oppression (or exist *on* it, parasitically speaking) and rationalize it can certainly be justified historically. Douglass, as a student of the Constitution, was certainly aware of the suffering “fleshy substance” that was obscured by the “resplendent” and “steely” beauty of universalist Enlightenment rhetoric. But Hartman, though she might want to, is unable to prove that universality logically, necessarily, and always is exclusionary. Douglass’s belief that universality is indeed universally attainable is at present unproven but not disproved; the transcendence he yearned for is not sought by many. His dream of universality has largely been abandoned in favor of the racialism that he found so painfully binding.

“The African Race Has Peculiarities”: Transcending a Racialized Body

The term “burdened individuality” attempts to convey the antagonistic production of the liberal individual, rights bearer, and raced subject as

equal yet inferior, independent yet servile, freed yet bound by duty, reckless yet responsible, blithe yet brokenhearted. “Burdened individuality” designates the double bind of emancipation—the onerous responsibilities of freedom with the enjoyment of few of its entitlements, the collusion of the disembodied equality of liberal individuality with the dominated, regulated, and disciplined embodiment of blackness, the entanglements of sovereignty and subjection, and the transformation of involuntary servitude effected under the aegis of free labor. (Hartman 121)

In the racial vision of abolitionists like Harriet Beecher Stowe, blacks were in many ways “burdened individuals,” to use Hartman’s term. Though they were expected to fulfill their duties responsibly and to conform to the same moral standards as whites, they were denied the same entitlements, notably the freedom to speak, think, and work in ways that were racially designated as “white.” Perhaps most painfully for Douglass, they were denied the easy “disembodied equality of liberal individuality”: they could never rise above the intellectual and social limitations of their physical “blackness.”

The transcendence of race described in My Bondage and My Freedom can be read as a reaction to the “burdened individuality” inherent in what George M. Fredrickson has called the “romantic racialism” of Uncle Tom’s Cabin (Fredrickson 432). Comparing Douglass’s discussion of race to Stowe’s, and especially comparing Douglass’s and Stowe’s competing literary characterizations called “Frederick Douglass” and George Harris, clarifies what was at stake for Douglass both in terms of political tactics and personal identity in the debate over race, and why, unlike George, he would rather forget his skin than darken it.

About three years before he wrote about his happiness in forgetting his blackness, Douglass had read these contrasting words written by George Harris, another thoughtful, articulate, passionate, and politically active man of mixed race, albeit a fictional one, who like Douglass was at various times both a slave and a cosmopolitan gentleman: “True . . . I might mingle in the circles of the whites, in

this country [France], my shade of color is so slight, and that of my wife and family scarce perceptible. . . . But, to tell you the truth, I have no wish to. . . . if I wished anything, I would wish myself two shades darker, rather than one lighter” (Stowe 374). Here George, and by extension his creator Harriet Beecher Stowe, offers an opposing vision of the relationship of race to identity and happiness.

Douglass must have read about George Harris with special attention, because George is Douglass-like enough that Douglass could assume that what Stowe wrote about George would apply to himself as well. Through studying the fate of George Harris, Douglass could see what his own place would be in a romantic racialist world, and by studying the Frederick Douglass of *My Bondage and My Freedom*, we can see that Douglass did not want to live in that world. George’s (and Stowe’s) romantic racialism led to beliefs about American identity, slavery, violence and work that Douglass could not share. By juxtaposing George’s and Douglass’s beliefs, it is possible to construct a pointed critique of Stowe’s romantic racialism out of *My Bondage and My Freedom*.

George’s romantic racialism causes him to lack an American identity—“I have no wish to pass for an American, or to identify myself with them,” he says (Stowe 374), and swept on a tide of romantic racialism, George moves to Africa—“my chosen, my glorious Africa!” (Stowe 376). Meanwhile Douglass identifies himself as an American and calls the American Colonization Society “that old offender against the best interests and slanderer of the colored people” (Douglass 443).

George’s racialism confounds any attempt to universalize the issue of slavery. He mentions “the Irish, the German, the Swede” in order to emphasize how different their concerns are from those of “Africans” (Stowe 375). Douglass, on the other hand, is a universalist who speaks about European revolutionaries in order to show that slavery is a human rather than an “African” problem. He commends those who “sympathize with Louis Kossuth and Mazzini, and with the oppressed and enslaved, of every color and nation, the world over,” and declares that “slavery is a crime . . . against God, and all the members of the human family” (Douglass 379). Perhaps Douglass found George’s racialist assertion that

“the African race has peculiarities” to be reminiscent of the racialism that built and justified Douglass’s alma mater, the “peculiar institution” (Stowe 375).

Romantic racialism causes George to assert that blacks are “an affectionate, magnanimous and forgiving” race which will conquer through “love and forgiveness . . . alone” (Stowe 376), but Douglass has learned from his experience as a slave that sometimes it is necessary to fight. More than once he quotes Byron’s lines, “Hereditary bondmen, know ye not/Who would be free, themselves must strike the blow?”-a call for violence and agency that conflicts with Stowe’s racialist version of slaves’ liberation (Douglass 287).

Though George is a talented inventor with a university education who spent his years as a slave working in a factory and not a field, he chooses images of plantation-style field labor to describe his life’s work. As he says, “I go to *Liberia*, not as to an Elysium of romance, but as to *a field of work*. I expect to work with both hands,-- to work hard; to work against all sorts of difficulties and discouragements; and to work till I die” (Stowe 376). Douglass has done plenty of hard physical labor himself, but his rejection of racialist values allows him to leave racialized images of labor behind and to describe his life’s work in terms that are incompatible with slave labor: he says his work is “wielding my pen, as well of my voice, in the great work of renovating the public mind” (Douglass 389).

Much of Douglass’s criticism of Stowe’s romantic racialism (and abolitionist racialism in general) is indirect-in part because, as Robert S. Levine points out, Douglass did not want to undermine the potential good that Uncle Tom’s Cabin and other expressions of racialist abolitionism could do for the antislavery cause. In his direct responses to Stowe in Frederick Douglass’ Paper, Douglass preferred to concentrate on their common moral suasionist goal of creating sympathy for the enslaved (Levine 526). But though Douglass avoids writing directly about Stowe’s romantic racialism, *My Bondage and My Freedom* gives Douglass the chance to respond to romantic racialism indirectly, and often subtly.

Part of Douglass’s negative response to racialism is negative in the sense that it

isn't there: while Stowe-like other racialist abolitionists-mentions race on virtually every page, Douglass is almost uncannily quiet about it. Douglass refuses to imitate Stowe's romantic racialist rhetoric, no matter how effective it may be, and instead consistently appeals to universalist rather than racialist values. His avoidance of race is especially noticeable in the anti-slavery speeches that are reprinted in the appendices of My Bondage and My Freedom. In "The Nature of Slavery" and "Inhumanity of Slavery" Douglass does not mention race once; for all Douglass's listeners know, the slaves could be white, and no doubt this possibility is central to Douglass's intended effect. In his disturbingly transcendent way, Douglass uses the concept of "blackness" to refer to morality rather than race. In "The Inhumanity of Slavery" Douglass describes the Fugitive Slave Law as "hell-black"; in "What to the Slave is the Fourth of July?" he says "the character and conduct of this nation never looked blacker to me than on this Fourth of July" (Douglass 428, 432). When Douglass does make rhetorical use of the concept of race, he appeals to the essential similarity of races rather than to their differences. In "Fourth of July" Douglass devotes a paragraph to the "negro race," but he does so only to affirm that blacks and whites have essentially everything in common (Douglass 433).

Douglass's implicit criticism of Stowe's romantic racialism pervades My Bondage and My Freedom; his criticism of the Garrisonian abolitionists' racialism is just as pervasive and quite explicit.

"A Little of the Plantation Manner": Transcending a Racialized Culture

The emancipatory requirement that all who would liberate and be liberated identify themselves through family history is believed to support diversity. The focus here is on those respondents whose family histories are different from the family histories of paradigmatic white male cultural leaders. No allowance is made for individuals who may be uncomfortable about sharing their family histories with strangers, for those who have no knowledge of their family histories, or for those whose family histories are so different that the dominant forms of family history do not apply. This

suggests that the effort to resist and change the naïve biases of a “view from nowhere” that favors traditional oppressors may sometimes make an informed view from nowhere desirable. (Zack 52)

This critique of present-day racist culture by philosopher Naomi Zack also describes antebellum racist abolitionist culture with startling precision. As a lecturer for the Garrisonian abolitionists, Douglass was required to identify himself through “family history” (Zack is substituting the word “family” for the [for her] too problematic word “race”) in a way that his “white male cultural leader” colleagues were not required to do. In order to be liberated and to liberate others, Douglass repeatedly had to situate himself in a racialized cultural context. His desire to stop the constant racial self-designating and simply to philosophize could not be fulfilled unless he had a “view from nowhere,” a transcendent view, as his white colleagues supposedly did-but under their “emancipatory requirement,” gaining this view was impossible for him. Douglass, like Zack, portrays the “emancipatory requirement” of racist self-designation as a binding constraint.

In My Bondage and My Freedom, Douglass recounts the words with which Garrisonian abolitionists tried to bind his public speaking to racist stereotypes: “‘Be yourself,’ said Collins, ‘and tell your story.’ It was said to me, ‘Better have a little of the plantation manner of speech than not; ‘tis not best that you seem too learned’” (Douglass 367). By juxtaposing the abolitionists’ admonitions to “be yourself” and to “have the plantation manner,” Douglass implies that the abolitionists thought his authentic, essential self (as opposed to his necessarily inauthentic, superficial, eloquent self) was somehow typical of slave culture and not “too learned.” (It was not only white abolitionists who thought Douglass should act more culturally “black.” Douglass says that Sojourner Truth “seemed to feel it her duty to trip me up in my speeches and to ridicule my efforts to speak and act like a person of cultivation and refinement” [McFeely 97]).

This racist criticism that culturally Douglass was “not black enough” is echoed in the writings of many modern Douglass scholars, including Waldo

Martin and Wilson Moses. I will examine their criticisms, and look at how Douglass responds to such criticisms through his representation of his experience in both “black” and “white” cultures in My Bondage and My Freedom.

Martin contends that Douglass was “blind” to African-American culture, and this much is difficult to argue with-though to suggest as Martin does that Douglass’s blindness is a result of his “bourgeois tastes” is a bit circular: the blindness and bourgeoisness come to the same thing. However, Martin’s diagnosis of Douglass’s “Americanism” as the root cause of his blindness is certainly convincing, if by Douglass’s “Americanism” Waldo means his attempt at a transcendent cultural universalism:

Douglass’s blindness to Afro-American culture illustrated a critical intellectual weakness resulting from his Americanism. Embracing the Euro-American and hierarchical bias endemic to American culture, he neither adequately appreciated nor understood Afro-American culture and the Afro-American roots of American culture. Clearly, he underestimated the complexity of both American culture and the Negro’s relationship to it. His bourgeois tastes found the rural, folk, and often unpolished quality of black expressive culture, like ecstatic religiosity, sorely wanting. (Martin 282)

Martin goes on to suggest that Douglass’s low opinion of African-American culture caused his ambivalence towards race as a category. This is a disputable claim (the causal arrow could also point in the opposite direction), but it is supported by the descriptions in My Bondage and My Freedom of Douglass’s childhood resistance to slave culture and pursuit of white culture, and his adult embracement of white “bourgeois” culture and a transcendent “American” ideal.

At the same time, however, the descriptions of Douglass’s early interactions with white and black culture make Martin’s criticism problematic, and they also complicate the commonly enforced assumptions that racialized individuals should identify with the “color” of racialized culture that matches their own. Douglass’s experience suggests the arbitrariness of matching racialized cultures and

individuals in this way. If a small child has an intense, early, and consuming appetite and aptitude for literacy, but has been born into a culture in which literacy is rare, unnecessary, and forbidden, is it possible for that child to grow up without feeling that his culture is limited or inferior? If the child then encounters a culture in which his own kind of skill with written and spoken words is honored, rewarded, and at some level taken for granted, can the child feel anything but at home in that culture (somehow, in spite of everything)? These are questions that neither I nor Martin nor Douglass can finally answer, but they should be considered whenever racist criticisms are leveled against Douglass's unfashionable white bourgeois tastes.

Wilson Moses's criticisms are vulnerable to the same questions. Moses suggests that Douglass's bourgeois whiteness was a façade that he constructed as an adult fugitive slave trying to gain an audience in bourgeois white America. According to Moses, Douglass "felt the necessity of abandoning the characteristic language and behavior of black males that predominated both on the plantation and in nineteenth-century urban America" (Moses 80). Moses, like the Garrisonian abolitionists, believes that underneath the façade lies Douglass's abandoned, authentic, securely racialized self, a self with more than a little of the plantation manner, even (in perfect racist stereotyping) a blackly sexually transgressive self which finds expression in his relationships with white women (Moses 72).

This racist view of Douglass's relationships with white women is briskly rejected by his biographer William McFeely, who accepts as authentic the Victorian gentleman aspect of Douglass that Moses dismisses as façade:

There was, and is, much prurient speculation—not always devoid of racism—about the sexual component of Douglass's friendships with white women, and lurking within are fantastical images of a not-so-noble savage turned gleaming black beast and proving fatally attractive to pale virgins anxious to yield their chastity to some imagined hugeness. Such damp reveries do not fit. Douglass was not black enough to gleam, even if he had wanted

to, and it is exceedingly hard to imagine the resolutely dignified Victorian gentleman ever trying. (McFeely 125)

Still, regardless of the character of Douglass's sexuality, Moses's claims about Douglass's artificial whiteness remain troubled. Moses challenges the validity of his own criticisms when he notes how "Douglass's early life was significantly removed from the typical experience of slavery" (Moses 73), and that "Douglass's knowledge of standard American English dated back to his experiences on the Lloyd plantation" (Moses 75). If Douglass did not have typical experience of racialized culture, and if he began work on his inauthentic façade when he was still a child, how could either (or any) racialized cultural category ever adequately contain him? Douglass was a slave and a child when he first began to cultivate his skills in speechmaking, but he chose to imitate a "white" rather than a "black" style of oral virtuosity: "His high-flown style of oratory, like that of Webster, had vernacular roots in the traditions of American evangelicalism, and to this extent was proletarian, but it was not derived from the speech habits of slaves" (Moses 76). What are the implications for designations of race if the spontaneous action of a racialized child can clash with the child's designated racialized culture?

In the end, modern critics' romantic desire for Douglass to appreciate racialized/slave culture is best answered by reading about Douglass's frustration with the limits of that culture. As a teenager, Douglass was leading adults far older than he was: teaching them to read, masterminding their escapes. Where could he go from there? He was incredibly good at manipulating words in a certain way, but what could he do with this skill? Should he go into the woods like Madison Washington and speak beautiful classical oratory to no one?

Douglass's account of his life as a slave contradicts racist assumptions by suggesting that it is and was impossible for Douglass to "be himself" and remain a typical member of African-American or slave culture. Douglass, unlike his modern critics, identifies African-American culture with illiteracy and slavery, just as he identifies white culture with literacy and freedom. In *My Bondage and My Freedom*, the existence of a separate African-American culture is presented as

an unfortunate result and function of the corrupt system of slavery, and slave or “black” culture, like abolitionist “emancipatory” requirements and slavery itself, is presented as a frustrating limitation that Douglass must transcend.

Much of Douglass’s descriptions of his childhood in plantation and slave culture seem to be written by a frustrated outsider. He was a precocious child and when describing his childhood surroundings he says that “A child cannot well look at such objects without *thinking*” (Douglass 161). This statement is possibly truer of Douglass than it is of children in general, including the children Douglass grew up with. *Especially* as a child, Douglass “was growing, and needed room.”

From early childhood Douglass immersed himself as much as possible in what could be called “white” culture, though to Douglass it could be better designated as literate culture. Through his speech and writing, Douglass early put a distance between himself and the culture he supposedly belonged to most deeply.

Douglass’s childhood experiences of being taught the alphabet by a white woman, of rescuing pages of the Bible from the gutter and smoothing and drying and hoarding them, of claiming the voice of “the Columbian Orator” as his own, of seeking out white children who could teach him to write, were none of them the actions of a typical product of slave culture.

Douglass’s description of his childhood experience of plantation culture is again a description of limits: “I am persuaded that I could not have been dropped anywhere on the globe, where I could reap less, in the way of knowledge, from my immediate associates, than on this plantation” (Douglass 169). He “can scarcely understand” the African slaves, and he intuitively makes friends with the white child who can help his “intelligence” (Douglass 169). Douglass takes the opportunity in recounting this friendship to reiterate his lifelong anti-racialist theme that “Color makes no difference”: “Are you a child with wants, tastes, and pursuits common to children, not put on, but natural? Then, were you black as ebony you would be welcome to the childhood of alabaster whiteness” (Douglass 169).

Douglass’s failure to sufficiently identify or be identified with “black” culture is described most brutally when his escape plan fails and he and the men he was to

have escaped with are in captivity. His master's mother yells at him, "You devil! You yellow devil! It was you that put it into the heads of Henry and John to run away. But for *you*, you *long legged yellow devil*, Henry and John would never have thought of running away" (Douglass 319). Douglass, the failed member of black culture, is here not perceived as black, or white, or human. He is a diabolical freak who somehow has access to ideas that are inaccessible to other members of his cultural group, and who infects the members of his culture with these alien ideas.

It is not surprising that Douglass, after straining against the limits of a racialized culture for so long, should want to transcend his identification with that culture: McFeely discusses the newly-escaped Douglass's "snobbish distancing of himself from black workingmen" and comments that "Douglass walked apart" (McFeely 80). But Douglass's desire to transcend racialized limits meant that his "blindness" to slave culture was not grounded in racist ideas. Douglass's critiques of slave culture were never based on racial arguments. Douglass ascribes the limiting aspects of black culture to the fact that it is largely a slave culture, and when he discusses black and white cultures he adopts a white middle-class point of view as the most transcendent available to him.

While some racist abolitionists, including Stowe, believe that what was perceived as the simplicity, naturalness, and primitive vigor of black culture could offer a corrective to white decadence, Douglass believes that it is black (i.e. slave) culture which is decadent, and so personal contact with whites—even whites of the slaveholding class—tends to elevate blacks. Douglass does not value the primitive, romantic, "African" virtues that captivate Stowe; he values instead the "Saxon"/universal virtues of literacy and intelligence, and he accepts the conventional "Saxon" definition of intelligence. Hence when describing a white friend of his boyhood, Douglass says that "Mas' Daniel could not associate with ignorance [i.e. slaves] without sharing its shade; and he could not give his black playmates his company, without giving them his intelligence, as well" (Douglass 169).

Douglass uses this same model of slave (or African-American) culture's

coarseness and degradation versus free (or European-American) culture's refinement and respectability to describe his encounter with the abolitionists fifteen or twenty years later:

I had not long enjoyed the excellent society to which I have referred [i.e. the society of white abolitionists], before the light of its excellence exerted a beneficial influence on my mind and heart. Much of my early dislike of white persons was removed, and their manners, habits, and customs, so entirely unlike what I had been used to in the kitchen-quarters on the plantations of the south, fairly charmed me, and gave me a strong disrelish for the coarse and degrading customs of my former condition. I therefore made an effort so to improve my mind and deportment, as to be somewhat fitted to the station to which I seemed almost providentially called. The transition from degradation to respectability was indeed great, and to get from one to the other without carrying some marks of one's former condition, is truly a difficult matter. I would not have you think that I am now entirely clear of all plantation peculiarities, but my friends here, while they entertain the strongest dislike to them, regard me with that charity to which my past life somewhat entitles me, so that my condition in this respect is exceedingly pleasant. (Douglass 416)

Here Douglass wholly accepts the abolitionists' standards of normal and "peculiar": in Douglass's "view from nowhere," being normal is acting like a free white abolitionist, and being peculiar is acting like a former slave. But nowhere in this passage is race mentioned as a cause of cultural differences.

Throughout My Bondage and My Freedom, Douglass reacts to racialist views of culture by championing transcendent free culture rather than racially specific culture. That is, he reacts to the racialist glorification/vilification of "African" culture by glorifying "Anglo-Saxon" culture and universalizing it. He asserts the equality, even the sameness of the races, and resists the temptation to ascribe cultural differences to a racial foundation. Given Douglass's premisses, Martin's concepts of "Afro-American culture" and "Euro-American culture" do not make

sense. Instead, Douglass sees the meaningful categories as “slave culture” and “free culture.” Douglass’s so-called “blindness” to black culture is thus a response to racialist views of culture, and an expression of his own experience in both black and white cultures.

“Race is Transient”: Transcending Race

If, as I would like to suggest, the construction of race is predicated on its obsessive performance, our refusal to grant that performance its centrality as “real” and observable truth is perhaps more than a mere academic pursuit. (Wiegman 9)

Ignoring or denying racial distinctiveness is a part of Douglass’s abolitionist strategy, just as emphasizing it is part of Stowe’s; but in Douglass’s case the denial seems at times to move beyond the merely strategic and into a foundational criticism of the category of race. In a prefiguring of W.E.B. Du Bois, Douglass uses trains as an ultimate proving-ground (or disproving-ground) for the validity of racial categories. (Once when Du Bois was asked to define blackness-“But what is this group; and how do you differentiate it; and how do you call it ‘black’ when it is not black?”-he answered, “I recognize it quite easily and with full legal sanction; the black man is a person who must ride ‘Jim Crow’ in Georgia” [Zack 17].)

One of the times when Douglass refuses to acknowledge the validity of racial categories is when he is ordered out of a first-class railroad carriage. The conductor says Douglass has to move because he is black, but instead of proclaiming to the conductor in ringing tones that “all the feelings, all the susceptibilities, all the capacities, which you have, I have,” Douglass refuses to, in Wiegman’s phrase, “obsessively perform” race, and instead simply denies that he is black: “This [his blackness] I denied, and appealed to the company to sustain my denial; but they were evidently unwilling to commit themselves, on a point so delicate, and requiring such nice powers of discrimination, for they remained as dumb as death” (Douglass 394).

Douglass’s public denial of his blackness is breathtaking. On a pragmatic level

the denial fits with some of Douglass's other "humorous" responses to racism in which he turns racist notions upside-down as a way of dealing with fraught situations (for example when he assures whites that he has finally managed to overcome his prejudice against them, in order to defuse their uneasiness over his sharing a bed with a white man). But Douglass's denial of his blackness has implications beyond its immediate practicality or humor. As Douglass never tired of saying (for example when a white man objected to Douglass's daughter going to a white school, or when thousands of blacks objected to Douglass's marriage to a white woman), he is as "white" as he is "black," so in denying his blackness Douglass is mocking the arbitrariness of racial mathematics, just as Mark Twain would later in Puddn'head Wilson. And though Douglass is being ironic when he suggests that assigning race is a "delicate" point that requires "nice powers of discrimination," his suggestion of the subtlety of racial designation lingers. Both Douglass's blatant upside-down assertion and his unsettling sarcasm critique the broad-brush racialist categories of his contemporaries.

In a sense, Douglass is denying his own body when he denies his racial designation, just as Stowe's George Harris is denying his own body when he disowns "half the blood in my veins" because it is feeble, "hot and hasty Saxon" blood (Stowe 376). But Douglass denies his blackness in order to transcend his racial designation, while Harris denies his whiteness in order to emphasize his racial designation. In Wiegman's words, by denying his racial designation, Douglass is refusing to grant the performance of race its centrality as "real" and observable truth, and the consequences are more than academic.

The extent and implications of Douglass's critique of racial categories can be seen when the account in My Bondage and My Freedom is read alongside a couple of his other train stories. Biographer William McFeely says that Douglass made the train incident "stock in trade for his lectures" (McFeely 93); before he wrote My Bondage and My Freedom Douglass had already told the story many times. In a speech in 1847, he told it in the following version, which was taken down in third person by a reporter:

Once he was travelling in that district; he stepped into a Railway car at Lynn, and had not been there long, when a little white man also got in and ordered him to withdraw. He showed him his ticket; it was of no avail. The man still continued to demand that he (Mr. Douglass) should take himself off. He asked this person the reason why he made such a request, and he replied, "Why, you know you are a negro." "I denied it," said Mr. Douglass, "for you know," he continued, "I am but half a negro; betwixt and between, as they say." (Blassingame 6-7)

In My Bondage and My Freedom, the interpretation of Douglass's denial is left to the reader, but in this earlier telling of the story Douglass explains himself after the fact by saying that he is "betwixt and between." Douglass's recognition of his liminality, of what might be called his mixed race, undermines the validity of fixed racial categories.

To completely establish his transcendence of racial categories, Douglass told a sequel anecdote a few years later, in 1851, in which he reversed his racial self-designation:

Indeed the white people are becoming more and more disposed to associate with the blacks. I am constantly annoyed by these pressing attentions. (Great laughter.) I used to enjoy the privilege of an entire seat, and riding a great deal at night, it was quite an advantage to me, but sometime ago, riding up from Geneva, I had curled myself up, and by the time I had got into a good snooze, along came a man and lifted up my blanket. I looked up and said, "pray do not disturb me, I am a black man." (Laughter.) (Blassingame 341).

By this time he finishes My Bondage and My Freedom, Douglass has already publicly identified himself as white-not-black, black-not-white, and mixed. If Douglass is at once negro and not negro, and neither negro nor not negro, then racial distinctions and hierarchies cease to make sense where he is concerned and thus cease to make sense at all if, as Wiegman argues, "the oppositional framework for articulating power depends on a homogenization of identities into

singular figurations . . . The logic of ‘majority’ reaches an impasse when the social subject cannot be aligned, without contradiction, on one side or the other of the minority-majority divide” (Wiegman 7).

What, then, were (and are) the not-merely-academic implications of Douglass’s train stories? The most important is that unlike many other abolitionists and black leaders, Douglass believed that black people’s freedom depended on, and was a necessary result of, the eventual transcendence of race as a meaningful cultural category. For the whole of his career, Douglass consistently emphasized universalism as a basis for political action and discouraged what he called “race pride.”

Towards the end of his life, Douglass said, “I do now and always have attached more importance to manhood than to mere kinship or identity with one variety of the human family. Race, in the popular sense, is narrow; humanity is broad. The one is special, the other is universal. The one is transient, the other permanent” (Martin xiii). “Race” as a physically grounded variety of identity is obviously transient in that it dies with the body, but Douglass also was referring to race’s transcendence as a cultural category. According to philosophers Bill Lawson and Frank Kirkland, Douglass believed that his ultimate vision of “assimilation” would be accomplished in two stages (similar in structure though not in substance to Marx’s two stages of the interim “dictatorship of the proletariat” and ultimate “communism”). First, believed Douglass, Americans would throw off their false consciousness of racialism and seek to create a united, universal culture without an enslaved culture within it. In order to achieve this they might have to rely on temporary “complexional institutions” (e.g. black institutions) and a kind of affirmative action, but these measures should be understood to be based on expedience and not any essential racial identity. Eventually (as in Marx’s plan), the institutions that encourage equality would melt away as a transcendent raceless humanity replaces them.

Douglass refused to include pseudo-biological notions of race in his plans for America’s ultimate transcendence of race. When he married a white woman, he was asked whether he thought the “amalgamation” of the races was the best way

to end racism. He rejected this idea because it was a biological solution to what he felt was a conceptual problem. To Douglass, racialism or racism was not a reflection of the existence of two different kinds of people. Instead, racism was the result of limited, immanent, bound thinking (Lawson and Kirkland 1-14).

If my reading of Douglass is correct, then Naomi Zack is wrong when she writes that “There is no sustained objection to ordinary racial definitions within the tradition of black emancipation” (Zack 18). In *My Bondage and My Freedom* and elsewhere, Douglass resists and criticizes ordinary racial definitions that other would-be emancipators emphasize and exploit.

Conclusion

This reading of Douglass may seem to put him in an unfashionable or even morally objectionable position. Certainly Douglass’s stated desire to transcend race has left him vulnerable to appropriation by such people as Dinesh D’Souza, a conservative writer who wants to use Douglass to justify the end of affirmative action (Douglass actually supported affirmative action as a means to a raceless end), and who, unlike Douglass, casts racial discrimination and advancement in purely economic terms (Lawson 4-14). But to a sensitive reader of *My Bondage and My Freedom*, it is clear that the freedom Douglass describes cannot be produced or contained by neo-conservative economic paradigms.

Like Douglass, we live in an age of limited alternatives; like antebellum American culture, our culture views any attempt to transcend inadequately grounded racial categories as both morally suspect and doomed. Romantic racialism is fashionable, and universalism is not. In 1855, Frederick Douglass had strong reasons to hold on to Enlightenment values of rationality and universalism, and to resist participating in a fashionable romantic critique of them. He had just experienced a conversion from Garrisonian to political abolitionism, and so had just claimed the Constitution for himself (and for his fellow African-Americans). His new right to transcendence offered him what was perhaps his only means of escape from the familiar romantic racialism that had justified his enslavement. Thus in *My Bondage and My Freedom*, a religious or romantic

belief in race binds rather than frees Douglass; race is “narrow,” and he “was growing, and needed room” (Douglass 367).

Nowadays, the grand narrative of transcendence may “continue to hold sway over our imagination,” but it is assumed to be irrelevant to “our contemporary crisis.” As Saidiya Hartman writes in an attempt to find and explain the purpose behind her book about race in the nineteenth century:

The intervention made here is an attempt to recast the past, guided by the conundrums and compulsions of our contemporary crisis: the hope for social transformation in the face of seemingly insurmountable obstacles, the quixotic search for a subject capable of world-historical action, and the despair induced by the lack of one. In this regard, it is hoped that the instances of insurgency and contestation narrated herein and the relentless proliferation of small acts of resistance perhaps offer some small measure of encouragement and serve to remind us that the failures of Reconstruction still haunt us, which in part explains why the grand narratives continue to hold sway over our imagination. Therefore, while I acknowledge history’s “fiction of factual representation,” to use Hayden White’s term, I also recognize the political utility and ethical necessity of historical fiction. (Hartman 14)

Essentially, Hartman is wistfully longing for a Frederick Douglass she cannot have; Douglass is “a subject capable of world-historical action” if there ever was one, but unfortunately the best Hartman can have is a blind, insane Don Quixote. Despairingly, she resigns herself to the production of “ethically necessary” falsehoods. More importantly, she resigns millions of literally poor, fatherless, and/or imprisoned human beings to “the relentless proliferation of small acts of resistance” such as “defiant” “nonsense, indirection, and seeming acquiescence,” and thus to endless poverty, fatherlessness, and imprisonment (Hartman 8).

Hartman wants people in bondage to be subversively fiddling while the world

is on fire. Douglass wants to them to shout glory because they need not be consumed.

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First Response

This is a lucid, sharp, and closely argued essay. The author offers a compelling reinterpretation of Frederick Douglass's attitudes towards racialism. She also discusses the limitations of the modern scholarly readings of them which she attributes to the critics' discomfort with Douglass's insufficient commitment to 'blackness' and Afro-American culture. The author's account of Douglass's universalism is subtle and provocative; it will be of interest not only to those working on Douglass but to anyone concerned about the issue of race and cultural difference.