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Blasting Reproach and All-Pervading Light: Frederick Douglass's Aspirational American Exceptionalism

LUCY WILLIAMS

ABSTRACT

Some scholars critique American exceptionalism as a proud, uncritical orientation. In this article, however, I argue that Frederick Douglass, an outspoken social critic, qualifies as an American exceptionalist thinker. I first identify and theorize two modes of exceptionalist rhetoric: accomplished exceptionalism, which is self-celebratory and largely uncritical, and aspirational exceptionalism, which is self-critical and reflective. I then provide a close reading of “What to the Slave Is the Fourth of July” to show how Douglass employs aspirational rhetorical techniques. Finally, I discuss the benefits of reading Douglass as an exceptionalist thinker and suggest that his aspirational rhetoric activates reflective and progressive modes of American citizenship.

American exceptionalism is a sentiment deeply embedded in the history, rhetoric, and culture of the United States. But despite its prevalence, American exceptionalism is a problematic concept. To begin, there is little consensus as to when the term originated—whether it was first articulated by Alexis de Tocqueville, Ronald Reagan, or someone else entirely. Moreover, few agree on what American exceptionalism actually means, and though a number of scholars have undertaken the challenging task of defining the term, no unifying definition has emerged (see, e.g., Bercovitch 1978, 8; Koh 2003; Cavanaugh 2006, 262;

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Edwards and Weiss 2011; Stewart 2011; Onuf 2012, 80).¹ Most significantly, scholars dispute what American exceptionalism signifies for and about the United States—whether it is a positive, patriotic concept; a descriptive, empirical claim (see, e.g., Hartz 1955; Lipset 1996); a statement of a duty to act as an exemplar (see, e.g., Tuveson 1968; Winthrop 2007; Cadle 2011; Ceaser 2012, 6);² or an articulation of a pernicious state fantasy that perpetuates exclusion and inequality (see Pease 2009).

Many scholars, politicians, and citizens embrace American exceptionalism as an “ideal responsible for defining, supporting, and developing U.S. national identity” (Pease 2007, 109). But there is also a vocal contingent of detractors who reject or take issue with the concept. Historians, for instance, often express concern that American exceptionalism describes a fictional United States and is not based in empirical reality.³ Other scholars worry that the concept is flat-footed or uncritical (see Fox-Genovese 1990; Appleby 1992; Pease 2009, 12, 42; Fong 2015, 4), that it facilitates white supremacy (see Stewart 2011, 167), or that it encourages politics of exclusion and othering (see Fox-Genovese 1990; Pease 2009). Clearly, the concept is fraught with definitional and normative ambiguity.

This article responds to critics who would reject American exceptionalism as an inherently inaccurate, self-celebratory, or pernicious concept. Although exceptionalism is sometimes deployed for uncritical and congratulatory purposes, the self-satisfied outlook some academics decry is not exceptionalism’s only form. Rather, American exceptionalism is conveyed through multiple rhetorical modes. In this article, I identify and theorize two such modes: *accomplished* exceptionalism, which is mostly uncritical, backward-looking, and self-congratulatory, and *aspirational* exceptionalism, which tends to be self-reflective, forward-looking, and ameliorative. I then describe the defining rhetorical features of both modes and show that, despite their divergent tropes, both are ultimately committed to a chosen, special, and superior United States.

To illustrate that exceptionalism is not inherently self-celebratory or uncritical, I offer Frederick Douglass as an example of the aspirational exceptionalist mode.⁴ Although Douglass’s feelings about the United States were constantly

1. For further discussion of American exceptionalism’s definitional vagueness and ambiguities, see Litke (2013, 1–21).

2. A common variation on this theme is the idea that America is responsible for spreading democracy throughout the globe. See Cavanaugh (2006) and Romney (2011).

3. Behdad, e.g., argues that America’s founding myths—including its “celebratory discourse” of exceptionalism—“blot[] out the historical conditions of [America’s] formation” and “entail[] deception and a deliberate attempt to cover up records and memories of the past” (2005, 77, 5).

4. I am not the first to identify Douglass’s exceptionalism. Frank, for instance, acknowledges that Douglass “regular[ly] invo[ked] the tropes of American exceptionalism” (2010,

in flux, during certain periods he endorsed the exceptionalist position that the United States was chosen, superior to other countries, and tasked with a unique mission or responsibility. But unlike accomplished American exceptionalists, he articulated his commitments in conditional and critical terms. This is particularly true in “What to the Slave Is the Fourth of July”—a text that is at once celebratory and critical. Through a close reading of the speech, I analyze Douglass’s aspirational rhetorical and stylistic techniques, showing that he is simultaneously hopeful about and deeply critical of the United States. I also describe the distinct modes of citizenship his aspirational rhetoric activates.

There are benefits to reading Douglass as an aspirational exceptionalist thinker. First, my analysis shows that American exceptionalism is not always self-celebratory, uncritical, or detached from historical reality. It reveals that America’s radicals and apologists sometimes speak in exceptionalist registers, and it shows that critics like Douglass may perhaps be exceptionalism’s most sophisticated defenders. Further, my reading has the potential to influence conversations about patriotism and citizenship practices in the United States. As Appleby (1992) and Pease (2007) argue, the rhetoric of American exceptionalism necessarily affects the way Americans understand themselves, their country, and their role(s) within society. Reading Douglass as an aspirational exceptionalist thinker thus challenges prevailing narrow notions of American citizenship and patriotism; shows that citizens can be both loyal to and critical of their country; and creates space for citizenship practices that are progressive, thoughtful, and self-reflective.

1. THEORIZING EXCEPTIONALISM: MULTIPLE MODES

Academics first began theorizing “the exceptional character of American civilization” in the 1940s and 1950s (Hodgson 2009, 7). These early studies did not always use the term “exceptionalism,” but they seized on what Miller called “the uniqueness of the American experience” (1956, ix). Hartz (1955), for example, suggested America is unique because of its peculiar liberal tradition and its lack of any viable socialist movement. Potter likewise emphasized the country’s exceptional “national culture” and argued that America’s material and economic abundance has produced a unique set of values (1954, 42). Hofstadter explored

218). But because Frank is primarily concerned with the constitutive effects of Douglass’s performative rhetoric, he does not offer a detailed analysis of Douglass’s exceptionalist commitments or techniques. Husband, by contrast, provides a thorough analysis of Douglass as an exceptionalist thinker, arguing that Douglass “developed . . . a distinctive form of American exceptionalism” grounded in the nation’s composite, multiracial origins (2018, 232). Like me, Husband studies the constitutive effects of Douglass’s exceptionalism, exploring how he deployed it to “promote domestic social justice” (232). But Husband does not, as I do here, consider Douglass’s place in the exceptionalist rhetorical tradition more generally.

America's distinctive ideological landscape; described its ideals, habits, and practices; and asserted that the country has not "[had] ideologies but [been] one" (qtd. in Lepore 2019, 102; see also Hofstadter 1948). And Lerner described Americans as "archetypal modern [men]" who fulfill "the great themes of the Renaissance and the Reformation" (1957, 63).

Later scholars, like Lipset (1996), Ignatieff (2005), and Koh (2003), expanded on earlier studies by identifying additional unique features of the American state. Others, like Rodgers (1998), engaged with the 1950s literature by considering how ebbs and flows in exceptionalism affected America's social and economic development.⁵ Still others responded to early exceptionalist scholarship by offering more nuanced and precise definitions of exceptionalism. Hodgson, for instance, defined exceptionalism as "the idea that the United States is not just the richest and most powerful . . . but is also politically and morally exceptional" (2009, 10). Cadle described it as a belief that America must "re-shape the world in the mold of western civilization" (2011, 127). Other scholars used exceptionalism as a label for America's distinct abundance of natural resources, superior economic and political systems, and unique "duty . . . to bring these political and economic institutions and ideals to the less advantaged and pitiable world" (Bon Tempo 2011, 150). And still others associated exceptionalism with claims of white racial superiority (Stewart 2011, 167).

These scholarly interventions have produced a vast but messy body of scholarship that defines exceptionalism in various (and conflicting) ways. But while the literature now encompasses various definitions and formulations, most scholars agree that exceptionalism entails three fundamental commitments: (1) a claim of distinctiveness, (2) a belief that the nation is somehow chosen,⁶ and (3) a sense of responsibility or an awareness of some role that America—and only America—can perform (see, e.g., Bercovitch 1978, 8; Cavanaugh 2006, 262; Cadle 2011; Ceaser 2012).

Although some scholars embrace these commitments as positive and productive, others lament that exceptionalism excludes minority voices or is too inclined to self-celebration. Appleby, for example, describes American exceptionalism as a "one-sidedly celebratory account of the nation's origins" (1992, 431). Fong similarly characterizes American exceptionalism as inherently regressive, arguing that America's racial tensions and inequalities "may perhaps be impossible to resolve given the way American exceptionalism has been conceived

5. According to Rodgers, America's Progressive Era politics were possible only because American exceptionalism waned between the 1870s and the 1940s, leaving the country "peculiarly open to foreign models and imported ideas" (1998, 4).

6. This entails a conviction that the United States has been selected or set apart by God (or, less commonly, by nature or history). For further discussion of chosenness and American exceptionalism, see Bercovitch (1978, 8), Eisen (1990, 28), and Cavanaugh (2006, 261).

and configured” (2015, 4). Fox-Genovese criticizes exceptionalism for its tendency to “deny the existence of systematic or structural inequalities” and to “exclude those who do not fit the subjective model” (1990, 28). And Pease suggests it is an ideological tool used to deflect critical thought and conceal and/or justify America’s racist, sexist, and violent history (2009, 12, 42).

These scholars are not wrong to argue that American exceptionalism can be self-celebratory and uncritical. It is, after all, a worldview sometimes deployed for congratulatory purposes. But self-celebratory, uncritical discourse is not exceptionalism’s only form. In the following sections, I argue that American exceptionalism can be—and is—conveyed through multiple rhetorical modes. I theorize two such modes. The first, which I call *accomplished* exceptionalism, is the self-celebratory, complacent, and uncritical mode typically associated with exceptionalist tropes. The second, which I call *aspirational* exceptionalism, is self-reflective, progressive, and ameliorative. Both modes share a fundamental commitment to the United States and embrace the idea that America is unique, chosen, and tasked with an important sociopolitical mission or calling. But while accomplished exceptionalism views America’s greatness as a preordained fact, aspirational exceptionalism treats the country’s excellence as an ideal to strive toward.

2. ACCOMPLISHED EXCEPTIONALISM

Accomplished exceptionalism is backward-looking, self-congratulatory discourse that assumes America was, is, and always will be chosen, superior, and tasked with a unique mission. It employs several defining tropes. First, accomplished exceptionalism is couched in certain or at least probable terms: it uses the indicative mood to convey America’s greatness as inalterable fact (e.g., America is great). Second, it is historically amnesiac and emphasizes the nation’s triumphs while glossing over its failures.⁷ Third, accomplished exceptionalism is self-satisfied, praising the nation for a job well done and leaving its audience comfortably content with the country’s status in the world. Finally, it portrays the nation as a united, monolithic whole and obscures individual differences, intimating that all Americans are singularly committed to a common project or goal.

These tropes produce distinct rhetorical effects. By trumpeting the country’s glorious achievements and disavowing its shameful moments, accomplished exceptionalism promotes feelings of national pride, inspires admiration, and reinforces a utopian portrait of the nation’s past. It also cultivates national

7. According to Behdad, “historical amnesia” occurs when a society consciously “denies certain historical facts” (2005, 4) and disavows awareness of—or responsibility for—its shortcomings (3–5).

unity because it downplays America's internal divisions. But accomplished exceptionalism does not ask questions and hence does not inspire change. Instead, its insistence that the country is always already great perpetuates a "comfort culture" (see Sturken 2011, 424) of self-satisfaction and discourages meaningful self-reflection or critique.

Accomplished exceptionalism has always pervaded America's political rhetoric and culture. In the colonial and founding period, prominent figures like John Adams deployed accomplished exceptionalism's self-assured tropes to confidently proclaim that America would one day be "the great seat of Empire," "obtain the mastery of the seas," and become so powerful that "the united force of all Europe [would] not be able to subdue [it]" (Adams 2011, 23). And though Alexis de Tocqueville did not himself take an uncritical or celebratory view of the United States, he observed an accomplished ethos among its citizens, remarking that "Americans . . . appear impatient of the smallest censure and insatiable of praise. . . . [T]hey unceasingly harass you to extort praise, and if you resist their entreaties, they fall to praising themselves" (1990, 585).

Accomplished exceptionalism has contemporary spokespeople as well. Today, politicians from both parties appeal to voters and rally supporters through accomplished tropes. Candidates routinely draw on its confident, assured outlook to promote their platforms,⁸ undermine opponents,⁹ and pledge that they will preserve the United States as "the single greatest nation in the history of the world" (Marco Rubio, qtd. in Beckwith 2016). Public eulogies channel its uncritical rhetoric to promise grieving audiences that America "is and always will be the greatest nation on Earth" (Obama 2012b) and "will always remain a shining beacon of freedom for the rest of the world" (Obama 2014). And current and former officeholders defend their legacies and condemn their successors using its self-aggrandizing themes.¹⁰

8. During the 2016 presidential election, for example, Marco Rubio condemned Obama for failing to preserve America's exceptional status, lamenting, "[Obama] wants America to become more like the rest of the world. We don't want to be like the rest of the world, we want to be the United States of America" (Beckwith 2016). Other candidates similarly grounded their campaigns in exceptionalist principles. Ted Cruz, for instance, announced his 2016 presidential bid by noting that "American exceptionalism . . . has made this nation a clarion voice for freedom in the world, a shining city on a hill" (2015). Hillary Clinton likewise assured voters she "still believe[d] in American exceptionalism" (2014).

9. This was especially true during the 2012 presidential election, when Mitt Romney accused Barack Obama of endorsing the "profoundly mistaken view [that] there is nothing unique about the United States" (Romney 2011). According to Romney, Obama "derisively said [that America is exceptional] in the way that the British think Great Britain is exceptional or the Greeks think Greece is exceptional." Romney pledged to be different: "I will never, ever apologize for America. . . . If you do not want America to be the strongest nation on Earth, I am not your President."

10. See, e.g., Dick Cheney and Liz Cheney's *Exceptional: Why the World Needs a Powerful America*—a book that highlights America's triumphs, condemns Obama, and insists

Ronald Reagan's famous Farewell Address (1989) provides an illustrative example. In the speech, Reagan describes America as "tall," "proud," and "God-blessed"—a "shining city on a hill." He encourages his listeners to attend to history, but when he speaks of the past, he emphasizes only seemingly glorious moments: "the Pilgrims [who] came here, . . . Jimmy Doolittle . . . , and what those 30 seconds over Tokyo meant." Disavowing America's conflicts, he claims the country is "teeming with people of all kinds living in harmony and peace." He shies away from the opportunity to admonish or critique, and though he alludes to the "great tradition of warnings in Presidential farewells," his only warning is that citizens must maintain "the resurgence of national pride." And he closes with the proud, accomplished assertion that America "has held steady no matter what storm" and is, and always will be, "a beacon, . . . a magnet for all who must have freedom."

As these excerpts reveal, accomplished exceptionalism is comforting and familiar—the sort of political speech American audiences expect and appreciate. But it is amnesiac, presenting only a selective, idealized account of the past. It conveys a misleading sense of strong national unity, and it describes America's greatness as a well-established fact. It is, ultimately, a celebration of America's successes. Because of this, accomplished exceptionalism does not encourage or demand change (and why would it, given that America is, in the accomplished exceptionalist account, *always already* great?). Instead, it lulls listeners into a supercilious state of complacency.

3. ASPIRATIONAL EXCEPTIONALISM

Aspirational exceptionalism is the accomplished mode's indeterminate, contingent counterpart. It suggests that America can be chosen and might fulfill a unique calling, but it recognizes these as goals, not guarantees. Self-critical and attentive to history, it acknowledges and considers America's failings—as well as its successes—and is willing (even eager) to explore how America can be better. Aspirational exceptionalism does not admit complacent self-praise. Rather, it espouses honest, bold, and sometimes biting critique, which is often perceived as unpatriotic or even un-American.

Like accomplished exceptionalism, aspirational exceptionalism views the United States as distinct, chosen, and tasked with unique responsibilities. But it articulates these commitments using several distinct tropes. First, aspirational exceptionalism usually includes some form of warning or self-critique accompanied by a transparent account of America's shortcomings and flaws.

that Americans must "sustain and perpetuate America as a model for all those who aspire to live in freedom . . . because there is no other who can" (2015, 258).

Second, it highlights the nation's cleavages and fractures. It does not pretend that America is one unified whole but instead acknowledges diverse interests and groups. Third, aspirational exceptionalism is forward-looking and is expressed in language of admonition and possibility, often using the conditional mood: it suggests that America could be great but does not assume that it is already so. Finally, aspirational exceptionalism can be raw and unpleasant, motivating and calling for change through harsh and jarring language.

Aspirational exceptionalism's rhetorical tropes provoke distinct responses. The aspirational mode creates dissonance that forces audiences to face their shortcomings and acknowledge areas the nation can (and perhaps must) improve. It exposes America's flaws and weaknesses, leaving audiences feeling rebuked and unsettled. By creating this discomfort, the aspirational mode spurs honest self-assessment and urges listeners to work toward America's yet-unfulfilled potential. But because it eschews the rosy tone and features of accomplished exceptionalism, it can also leave audiences feeling condemned.

Aspirational exceptionalism may seem foreign or unfamiliar to those steeped in more "traditional" exceptionalist registers. Yet aspirational exceptionalism is not new, and some of the most recognizable exceptionalist texts contain aspirational elements. John Winthrop's "Model of Christian Charity," for example, famously described America as a "city upon a hill" and emphasized the colonists' unique potential for excellence (2007, 17). But as Rodgers observes, the speech also "abrupt[ly]" moved "from glorification to warning" and "carried broad veins of doubt and caution" (2018, 39, 30). Rather than present America's exemplary status as a foregone surety, Winthrop depicted the pilgrim's project as "a deeply precarious one" and warned that "to be as a city on a hill was to live, permanently and inescapably, in the conditional tense" (Rodgers 2018, 41, 42). If the speech served as "a founding statement of American exceptionalism" (5), then, it did so in aspirational, rather than assured, terms.

Other canonical exceptionalist texts likewise employ aspirational tropes. George Washington's Farewell Address, an oft-cited exceptionalist speech (see Koh 2003, 1481 n. 4; Wisley 2015, 62), affirmed the president's "fervent love towards" the country and described America's potential for greatness (Washington 1796). But it also adopted an aspirational posture and, "looking toward the future" (Bemis 1934, 250), warned against the many "vices" that could "render[] impossible" the American experiment (Washington 1796). Abraham Lincoln similarly articulated exceptionalist commitments using conditional, aspirational terms. As Ross notes, Lincoln "did not doubt . . . that America had a special role to play in the . . . worldwide progress of liberal principle" (2009, 396). Still, he routinely framed his exceptionalism as a contingent

possibility, describing Americans as an “*almost* chosen people” and suggesting that God has “never *yet* forsaken” the nation (396).

Scholars who are not typically included in the exceptionalist canon also use aspirational tropes. In his 1829 “Appeal to the Coloured Citizens of the World,” for instance, David Walker drew on aspirational themes to focus “the attention of the world” on America’s flagrant disregard of its republican founding principles (“Compare your . . . Declaration of Independence, with your cruelties and murders . . . !!!!!”; 2011, 74–75). Henry Highland Garnet (1843) similarly deployed aspirational tropes in his “Address to the Slaves of the United States,” which suggested that true patriots would “torment the God cursed slaveholders,” engage in violent resistance, and reclaim the principles of the “glorious” Declaration of Independence. James Baldwin embodied the aspirational ethos when he insisted that he “criticize[d] [America] perpetually” because he “love[d] [it] more than any other country in the world” and hoped to help it fulfill its exceptional potential (2012, 9). And on a few occasions, Barack Obama used aspirational tropes to condemn America’s faults (“We . . . make mistakes”), encourage audiences to be “honest with [them] selves,” and admonish listeners to “change” and “do better” (2012a).

Aspirational tropes are also a recognizable discursive feature of America’s jeremiadic tradition. Named after the biblical prophet Jeremiah, a “jeremiad” sermon laments a society’s failings while simultaneously attempting to revitalize its mission, purpose, or potential. Such speeches were common in early Puritan America and have been present in America’s rhetorical culture ever since (see Bercovitch 1978; Murphy 2009). Because America’s jeremiads bear their own distinct hallmarks and tropes,¹¹ not all aspirational exceptionalist rhetoric qualifies as jeremiadic speech. But all jeremiads contain aspirational exceptionalist elements. Jeremiads accept, for instance, the exceptionalist premise that Americans, “as God’s chosen people, [have] a unique mission and destiny” (Johannesen 1985, 158; see also Bercovitch 1978, 7–8). And jeremiads articulate this belief in distinctly aspirational terms: by denouncing the nation’s defects, describing its potential, directing listeners “toward the fulfillment of their destiny” (Bercovitch 1978, 9), and spurring them toward “active reform” (Minter 1974, 52). Jeremiads “join social criticism to spiritual renewal” (Bercovitch 1978, xi) and “intertwine[] lamentation of sins and decay with firm optimism, with affirmation of redemption, promise, and progress”

11. The American jeremiad is generally understood to be a progressive story about the arc of history (see Bercovitch 1978). Aspirational exceptionalism is not committed to this story, and it does not adopt jeremiadic metaphysics, though it does share the jeremiad’s concerns with progress and improvement.

(Johannesen 1985, 159). They thus treat American greatness as an aspirational possibility—a “potentially bright future” that America can achieve “if only citizens will repent and return to the values, principles, and traditions that made them a ‘chosen’ people” (161).¹²

Because aspirational exceptionalism’s critical and conditional tropes are so unlike the self-celebratory and assured features of accomplished exceptionalism, political theorists have not generally recognized the aspirational mode as a form of exceptionalist rhetoric. Thus, despite the thematic overlap between what I am calling accomplished and aspirational exceptionalism—their shared commitment to a special, chosen, and superior United States—aspirational thinkers are frequently written off as figures who do not contribute to the exceptionalist tradition.¹³ The aspirational mode may be classified as social criticism or apologetic rhetoric, but it is not studied *qua* exceptionalism. Indeed, some exceptionalists might argue there is no such thing as aspirational exceptionalism at all.

Because aspirational exceptionalism is a mostly unrecognized category, there is no body of literature analyzing the aspirational exceptionalist mode or its defenders. In the following sections, I begin to fill this gap by presenting Frederick Douglass as an aspirational exceptionalist thinker.¹⁴ Through close reading and rhetorical analysis of “What to the Slave Is the Fourth of July,” I show that Douglass employs the aspirational tropes described above. I also show that, despite his captious diction, Douglass maintains a sincere and profound hope in America’s potential and exemplifies an exceptionalism that is not self-celebratory, complacent, or backward-looking. By offering this analysis, I demonstrate exceptionalism’s multiple and differentiated tradition and show that citizens can, like Douglass, be both critical and committed to America’s possible greatness.

12. For further discussion of the American Jeremiad, see Miller (1956) and Murphy (2009).

13. For example, James Baldwin, who regularly deployed aspirational tropes, was accused of leading a “coterie of America-haters” (see Buccola 2017, 119). Barack Obama likewise utilized the aspirational mode and yet has been criticized as “chief among current opponents of American exceptionalism” (Litke 2013, 5).

14. I am not the first to identify the critical, aspirational features of Douglass’s rhetoric. Rodgers, e.g., argues that Douglass deployed “the chosen nation theme” to critique America and to suggest that “only when the nation’s deepest flaw [was] excised would [the country’s] promise be realized” (2018, 153–54). Myers notes that Douglass constantly agitated for the United States—a country “explicitly dedicated to the true principles of justice” (2008, 198)—to fulfill its potential by better aligning itself with the principles of natural law. And Buccola argues that Douglass urged Americans to actively (and violently, if necessary) strive to secure liberal values (2012, 114–27, 29–133). But none of these scholars have labeled Douglass as an exceptionalist thinker, and none have attempted to understand his aspirational rhetoric as a mode of exceptionalist discourse.

4. ASPIRATIONAL EXCEPTIONALISM IN “FOURTH OF JULY”

Douglass was not always an exceptionalist thinker. At the outset of his public life, he accepted William Lloyd Garrison’s belief that the Constitution was inherently pro-slavery, and he vigorously and publicly defended the proposition that “[the Constitution] was . . . well calculated to aid and strengthen that heaven-daring crime” (Douglass 2016c, 39).¹⁵ He did not initially endorse the accomplished view that the United States was chosen or special. Nor did he take the aspirational position that the country had unique, yet-to-be-attained potential for excellence. Instead, Douglass insisted that America and its institutions could never be anything but “inhuman, unjust, and affronting to God and man,” and he described the Constitution as “a compact . . . which, [because of] its wicked requirements, [he could] never enter” (42).

In the early 1850s, Douglass unexpectedly changed views. After growing close to a group of abolitionists who insisted that slavery was incompatible with the Constitution, Douglass published an editorial “to announce at once to [his] old anti-slavery companions . . . that [he had] arrived at the firm conviction that the Constitution . . . might be made consistent . . . with the noble purposes avowed in its preamble” (2016a, 43). This transition marked a pivotal moment in his development as an exceptionalist thinker. As he abandoned Garrisonianism, Douglass contemplated, for the first time, the possibility of working within, improving, and refining the country’s political and legal structures. And as he did so, his wholesale rejection of America’s institutions and politics gradually gave way to a nuanced exceptionalist orientation—one that, though attentive to the country’s flaws, articulated an aspirational hope in its potential.¹⁶

In 1852, while in the midst of this transition, Douglass authored his famous “What to the Slave Is the Fourth of July” address. Caustic and critical, the speech bears traces of Douglass’s former Garrisonian commitments. Perhaps because of this, it is not recognized in the canon of American exceptionalism. But though its sharp rhetoric is unlike the more familiar conciliatory tone of accomplished exceptionalist rhetoric, “Fourth of July” also conveys a sincere and

15. For further discussion of Garrison’s position, see Glickstein (1995) and Ruderman (2003, 377–85).

16. Douglass’s transformation from Garrisonian to antislavery constitutionalist became more pronounced as his public life progressed. Despite his earlier insistence that America’s institutions were fundamentally and irredeemably intertwined with slavery, he eventually supported the US government during the Civil War. And by the war’s end, he had embraced partisan politics, joined the Republican Party, and become a federal officeholder. As his relationship toward America’s politics and institutions changed, his orientation toward exceptionalism also evolved.

profound faith in America's potential for excellence. It thus captures a unique moment in the evolution of Douglass's exceptionalist thought and provides an early example of his newly adopted aspirational exceptionalist orientation.

Douglass begins "Fourth of July" by establishing his exceptionalist commitments, emphasizing the country's unique, special, and chosen status. He praises, for instance, the "genius of American institutions" and the "grandeur" of its "national super-structure" (Douglass 2016m, 70, 55). He also celebrates the "heroes" whose "rare virtue" made America possible (54). He stresses the founders' unique "manhood" and argues that "it does not often happen to a nation to raise, at one time, such a number of truly great men" (54). And though he acknowledges that "the coming into being of a nation, in any circumstances, is an interesting event," he claims that "wonders" and "peculiar circumstances . . . ma[de] the advent of *this* republic an event of *special* attractiveness" (52–53; emphasis added).

Though his opening paragraphs are laden with these traditional exceptionalist refrains, Douglass quickly reveals that his exceptionalism is aspirational, not accomplished. After celebrating the country's special origins and unique founders, he turns to "stern rebuke" and "blasting reproach," and he repeatedly and unambiguously denounces America's hypocrisy and moral culpability (Douglass 2016m, 59). He calls the American slave trade "fiendish and shocking," and he boldly declares that "the character and conduct of this nation never looked blacker to [him] than on this Fourth of July" (57). He accuses America of "inhuman, disgraceful, and scandalous" practices and, inverting the traditional Independence Day refrain, argues that "for revolting barbarity and shameless hypocrisy, America reigns without a rival" (62, 60). He also reproves America for its "gross injustice and cruelty" and brazenly tells his listeners, "YOUR HANDS ARE FULL OF BLOOD" (60, 65). Douglass thus eschews the comforts of accomplished rhetoric in favor of more cutting, incisive words—language that does not reaffirm America's infallibility but, as Gooding-Williams argues, "envisions American history as a fall from grace" (2009, 194).

Douglass also makes intentional stylistic choices that shine light on America's cleavages. Rather than insist that America is a unified and harmonious whole, he repeatedly distances himself from his audience by addressing his listeners in the second person, referring to "*your* national independence," "*your* political freedom," "*your* nation," and "*your* fathers" (i.e., America's founders; Douglass 2016m, 50–51). He explicitly identifies and describes "the disparity between [himself and his listeners]," and he notes that "this Fourth of July is *yours*, not *mine*" (57). As Bromell observes, these rhetorical decisions "afford[] [Douglass] a liminal position outside of the American polity from which he can see and critique it" (2011, 714; see also Stephens 1997,

184–85). More significantly, though, these techniques permit Douglass to “make[] visible his nonstatus as a credible speaker of claims” (Zerilli 2016, 154) and to enact, rather than simply articulate, his arguments. As Frank explains, this “staging precedes and enables Douglass’s argument” by “call[ing] attention to the power organizing the speech situation itself” and by performing “the absence of a space of equal communicative exchange” (2010, 212, 215). It thus highlights the ways Douglass is “not included within the pale of this glorious anniversary” (Douglass 2016m, 57), foregrounds the nation’s cleavages, and “makes visible” the hypocrisies and inequalities Douglass describes (Frank 2010, 212).¹⁷

Douglass further highlights America’s internal divisions through a pattern of imperative mood clauses. In one poignant passage, he instructs his audience to “behold . . . the internal slave-trade” (Douglass 2016m, 61). As if narrating a scene in front of him, he describes “men and women, reared like swine, for the market” (61). He then directs his listeners to “see the old man, with locks thinned and gray,” to “cast one glance . . . upon that young mother, whose shoulders are bare to the scorching sun,” and to “see . . . that girl of thirteen, weeping . . . as she thinks of the mother from whom she has been torn!” (61). By directing his listeners to “attend” this imaginary slave auction, he conjures a lucid portrait of American slavery (61). And by utilizing the imperative mood, he forces his audience to “behold,” “witness,” and “see” the “horrors” he has uncovered (61). This technique aims to provoke a visceral, affective response in his audience. It is not enough for his listeners to rationally assent to his claims; Douglass wants them to also experience the horrors bodily.

Douglass also draws heavily on religious language and imagery—a technique that lends his critique divine authority and suggests that America has offended both humanity and a higher power. For example, he calls slavery “the great sin and shame of America” and claims that he “[stands] with God” in denouncing America’s practices (Douglass 2016m, 58). He also insists “there is not a nation on the earth *guilty* of practices more shocking and bloody, than are the people of these United States” (60). These accusations are the antithesis of accomplished exceptionalism’s self-righteous stance. If the accomplished mode views America as a “God-blessed” nation that perpetually enjoys divine favor (Reagan 1989), Douglass sees the country as both “sublime” and “superlatively guilty” (2016m, 54, 65)—a nation that is capable of greatness but nonetheless offends its maker.

And yet, despite his vitriol, Douglass remains invested in the United States. In fact, he acknowledges that his “fire” and “thunder” are meant to “quicken[],”

17. For further discussion of the performative dimensions of Douglass’s rhetoric, see Frank (2010, chap. 7) and Zerilli (2016, 153–57).

“rouse[],” and “startle[],” but not to destroy (Douglass 2016m, 68). Douglass has little patience for America’s shortcomings, but he remains dedicated to the country’s “great principles” (70). Though his speech is truculent and critical, he repeatedly addresses his audience as “Fellow citizens” (50). As Bromell argues, “If [Douglass] had wished only to suggest that he was in no sense of the word an American, and in no way a communicant with his audience in this celebration of the nation’s birth, he would not have employed this phrase” (2011, 715). Douglass’s use of this appellation suggests that, though “his rhetoric insists on the ‘immeasurable distance’ between them,” he aims to “bind his audience to him” (715). By distancing himself (through “you” and “your”) and then reaffirming connection (through “Fellow citizens”), Douglass underscores his commitment to America’s potential for unity and equality.

Most significantly, Douglass concludes “with *hope*,” and he insists that “notwithstanding the dark picture [he has] this day presented, [he does] not despair of this country” (2016m, 70).¹⁸ This optimism stems, in part, from his belief in the forces of universalism and cosmopolitanism. Douglass recognizes that global affairs are changing, that “intelligence is penetrating the darkest corners of the globe,” and that nations can no longer “shut [themselves] up[] from the surrounding world . . . without interference” (70). And because he believes this progressive trend is universal, he expects it will necessarily and inevitably change American politics, just as it will affect the rest of the world (71).

But Douglass also suggests that America has a unique obligation to hasten slavery’s demise. According to Douglass, the country has publicly endorsed “saving principles” that are “entirely hostile to the existence of slavery” (2016m, 53, 70). Through the Declaration of Independence, America “declare[d], before the world, and was understood by the world to declare” its commitment to a set of Enlightenment values (68). Its founders exemplified this commitment by acting “with a sublime faith in the great principles of justice and freedom” (55). And they adopted as their Constitution “a GLORIOUS LIBERTY DOCUMENT” that, if “interpreted as it *ought* to be interpreted,” contains “neither warrant, license, nor sanction” of slaveholding (69).¹⁹ In light of these public pronouncements, America’s ongoing acceptance of slavery constitutes a unique form of hypocrisy and “brands [the country’s] republicanism as a sham” (68). But the nation’s professed principles also provide the unique opportunity—and the heavy obligation—to fulfill the “glorious” promises of its founding (69). Douglass thus views America as a “*potential* exemplar to the world” (Ross 2009, 386)—a nation that may, if it chooses, help usher in

18. For an excellent analysis of Douglass and hope, see Blight (1991, 1–26).

19. Again, this favorable assessment of the Constitution was, in 1852, a relatively new feature of Douglass’s thought.

the “all-pervading light” that “speed[s] the year of jubilee [t]he wide world o’er” (Douglass 2016m, 71).²⁰

In her study of “Fourth of July,” Zerilli suggests that “the meaning of Douglass’s speech emerges in the context of his speaking”—that is, “through [his] rhetoric” (2016, 155). In other words, Douglass does not communicate through claims and arguments alone, but instead conveys his message using particular rhetorical tropes and techniques. As the foregoing analysis reveals, those tropes are both exceptional and aspirational. Through deliberate use of aspirational rhetorical strategies, Douglass reveals that he is aware of America’s present flaws, yet committed to its flawless future. He recognizes America is special and “great” (Douglass 2016m, 70), but he also acknowledges that it is not necessarily so—that it can, and does, betray its founding principles. Though he praises America’s special features, his speech is, ultimately, a “ruthless critique of everything existing” (Ochieng 2011, 168), a stern diatribe that repudiates accomplished exceptionalism’s self-celebratory tropes.

Still, Douglass believes there are global “forces in operation” that ensure “the doom of slavery is certain” (2016m, 70). And because the United States has precommitted itself to the principles animating those universal forces, he believes the country is uniquely positioned to participate in the world’s progress. As Husband notes, Douglass “ironiz[es] American exceptionalism—characterizing the nation as one founded upon principles it currently flouts— . . . to move the audience to remedy its hypocrisy” (2018, 230). Despite the country’s present flaws, he predicts that Enlightenment values will provide “the RINGBOLT to the chain of [America’s] destiny” (Douglass 2016m, 53). In sum, he is a consummate exceptionalist, but he articulates his exceptionalism in aspirational, not accomplished, terms.

5. DOUGLASS’S ASPIRATIONAL POLITICS

Although “Fourth of July” marked a unique moment in Douglass’s development as an exceptionalist thinker, it was not the only time he deployed aspirational tropes. Indeed, in his later speeches and writings, Douglass continued

20. Douglass also articulates this faith in America’s special potential in his other speeches and writings. In an 1857 speech responding to the Dred Scott decision, for example, he argues that “the tendencies of the age” ensure that “slavery is doomed” (Douglass 2016d, 257, 256). But he also argues that America is poised to play a special role in this progression. “I know of no soil,” he states, “better adapted to the growth of reform than American soil. I know of no country where the conditions for affecting great changes in the settled order of things, for the development of right ideas of liberty and humanity, are more favorable than here in these United States” (257). For a comparable, contemporary defense of the American nation as a site to actualize universal values and ideals, see Lepore (2019).

to offer a distinct “mixture of despair and hope” (Hughes 2003, 13), critiquing his country while simultaneously yearning for its “repentance” (Douglass 2016k, 420). If Douglass has been excluded from the canon of American exceptionalism, then, it is not because he lacks exceptionalist commitments. Rather, it is because scholars of exceptionalism, perhaps distracted by Douglass’s caustic and critical tone, have overlooked and ignored the extent to which he enacts exceptionalist themes.

I have begun to correct that oversight by identifying another strand of exceptionalism—aspirational—and by highlighting Douglass’s use of and contribution to this mode. But what do we gain by acknowledging Douglass’s aspirational exceptionalism? Political and rhetorical theorists have long argued that we “constitute ourselves as individuals, as communities, and as cultures, whenever we speak” (White 1985, 690). Put differently, language has constitutive, transformative power: it is not, as Taylor explains, “just a set of words which designate things” but a medium that “make[s] possible a new awareness of things” and activates “new ways of feeling, of responding to things” (1985, 233). In recent years, scholars concerned with these transformative effects have examined how popular speeches (e.g., Martin Luther King’s “Letter from Birmingham Jail,” Leff and Utely 2004), phrases (e.g., “we the people,” Frank 2010), and genres (hip hop, Kumanyika 2015; poetry, Frank 2010) shape political identities and cultures. My reading of Douglass does the same. Like other rhetorical forms, American exceptionalist rhetoric necessarily affects the way listeners understand themselves, their country, and their role(s) within society. Understanding Douglass as an exceptionalist thus does more than simply expand the canon of American exceptionalist thought; it also reveals the constitutive effects of aspirational rhetoric and activates new and distinctly Douglassian “way[s] of being in the world” (Taylor 1985, 232).²¹

One “way of being” Douglass’s aspirational rhetoric activates is a politics of engaged involvement. As Myers notes, Douglass believes individuals possess a “duty to resist injustice,” and he views “resistance to slavery [as] a natural duty no less than a natural right” (2008, 58).²² As part of his efforts

21. Husband’s work likewise considers the constitutive effects of Douglass’s rhetoric and analyzes how Douglass “used constitutive rhetoric to re-construct [his] identit[y] as [a] speaker[] as well as the relationship between African Americans and the nation” (2018, 230–31). But whereas Husband focuses primarily on how Douglass affected his contemporaneous, Reconstruction-era listeners, I here consider the constitutive and transformative potential his rhetoric has for modern audiences.

22. According to Myers, Douglass’s belief in the “duty to resist injustice” is grounded in natural law principles, including the idea that the “law of nature . . . assigns natural penalties both to criminal actions and to the *inaction* of those who fail to . . . keep[] . . . their natural duties” (2008, 58, 62). For more thorough discussion of Douglass’s views on natural law, see Myers (2008, 47–82).

to spur America toward its exceptional potential, then, Douglass endorses specific political actions, insisting that “deeds, not words, are the order of the day” (2016h, 95). Douglass emphatically urges his black countrymen to join the Union Army, admonishing them to “enlist now, and forever put an end to the human barter and butchery which have stained the whole South” (2016n, 190). He begs black Americans to “press” for the “‘immediate, unconditional, and universal’ enfranchisement of the black man, in every state in the Union” (Douglass 2016l, 191). He even approves more radical, extrapolitical actions—suggesting, for instance, that it is “right and wise” to kill slave catchers (Douglass 2016g, 431). For Douglass, “there is no neutral ground” (2016b, 80), and humans are “mean or noble according to how [they] choose between action and inaction” (2016n, 187). His aspirational rhetoric thus invites action: Douglassians must be passionately involved in political life.

Douglass’s aspirational rhetoric also prompts practices of political resistance. In accordance with natural law theory, Douglass believes governments are only “authorized . . . to pass and enforce laws which are in accordance with justice, liberty and humanity” (2016f, 46). If and when government does not conform to these principles, he argues it becomes “the first duty of every American citizen, whose conscience permits so to do, to use his political as well as his moral power [to] overthrow” the offending law or institution (Douglass 2016a, 43). As Myers explains, Douglass “conceive[s] of mankind as the distinctively resistant, revolutionary, and progressive species” and understands “resistance as a representative human virtue” (2008, 64). Hence, Douglass “provide[s] a thorough, complex instruction in the virtue of resistance (63) and insists on exposing “the fallacy that submission is the best remedy for the wrongs and injustice to which [the slave population is] subjected” (Douglass 2016f, 49).

Because Douglass recognizes that resistance often requires violence, he “glorifie[s] and even sanctifie[s] violent force” (Myers 2008, 69). But his politics of resistance is not unlimited. For instance, Douglass does not endorse violent resistance when “the moral power of the nation is with us” or when there is potential for reform; hence, he does not advocate for abolitionists to leave the Union (2016d, 257).²³ He also does not condone resistance for unjust or immoral causes—hence his description of Southern resistance as “treason,” “infamy,” “impotency,” and “folly” (Douglass 1994, 773–74). Douglass’s endorsement of “righteous violence [is] justified only by necessity, as the barbarism

23. Douglass may have felt otherwise when he was aligned with the Garrisonians, but by the early 1850s he maintained that he “would much rather conquer, and stay in the Union” than accept “the extravagance and nonsense of advocating a dissolution of the American Union as a means of overthrowing slavery” (2016d, 257).

required to overcome barbarism” (Myers 2008, 71). But “when every avenue to the understanding and heart of the oppressor is closed,” and “when [oppressors are] deaf to every moral appeal” (Douglass 2016f, 49), Douglass believes that resistance—even if violent—is “wise, as well as just” (2016g, 433).

Douglass endorses political engagement and active resistance using clear, reasoned logic. But as Frank (2010) and Zerilli (2016) have observed, he also deploys performative and affective rhetorical strategies.²⁴ These model additional aspirational “way[s] of being” (Taylor 1985, 232). One such behavior is honesty, candor, or—to use the Greek concept—*parrhesia*. According to Foucault, *parrhesia*, or frank speech, is the act of giving “a complete expression of what the speaker has in mind, so that the audience is able to catch exactly what he says” (2019, 40). A *parrhesiastic* speaker “uses the most direct words [and] the most direct forms of expression he can find,” “says what he knows to be true,” and demonstrates the veracity of his or her claims by speaking with sincerity and courage (40, 42). Such candor necessarily involves “risk” and “danger” (42). Indeed, the *parrhesiastes* is someone who “risks his life [to tell the truth] because he recognizes that telling the truth is his own duty” (46).

Douglass embodies this *parrhesiastic* disposition. On multiple occasions, he articulates his intent to “expos[e]” (Douglass, 2016k, 420; 2016m, 59), “startle[]” (2016m, 59), and “rouse[]” (2016m, 59), revealing his willingness to “open up, establish, and confront the risk of offending the other person” (Foucault 2008, 11). He also confesses that he uses “the severest language [he] can command” (Douglass 2016m, 58), an admission bearing striking resemblance to Foucault’s description of the *parrhesiastes* as one who “uses the most direct words [and] the most direct forms of expression he can find” (2019, 40). Douglass’s aim to “concentrat[e] public attention on the system [of slavery]” suggests that he intends his work to function as a revelatory exposé (2016k, 420, 413). He also acknowledges the dangers inherent in his truth-telling and notes that

24. Frank argues that Douglass’s performative rhetoric in “Fourth of July” enacted a “constituent moment” by highlighting the ways Douglass was “both a subject who lacked the rights that he had . . . and one who had the rights that he lacked (in his very speaking of these claims)” (2010, 219). Zerilli suggests that Douglass’s sharp, biting, and emotional rhetoric challenged “the charade of deliberative discourse that presupposes . . . equality of speaking subjects” and performed (“ma[de] visible”) his exclusion from the public, deliberative sphere (2016, 154). Other scholars have also commented on Douglass’s performative techniques. Tang, e.g., argues that Douglass “present[s] himself to the wider black community and the rest of the nation as an archetype that disclose[s] the extent of individual capabilities” (2005, 24). Gooding-Williams likewise suggests that Douglass “depicts himself as . . . an exemplar of the possibility of refounding and re-constructing the nation” (2009, 168).

his words will, at best, “subject [him] to no inconsiderable amount of censure” (413). Douglass thus “chooses truth instead of lies, death instead of life and security, criticism instead of flattery, and duty instead of interest and selfishness” (Foucault 2019, 46). He is a thorough parrhesiastes, and through his performative rhetoric he models and endorses courageous, open, and candid speech.

Douglass also models open-minded nondogmatism—a willingness to revisit, reconsider, and reassess. This intellectual flexibility is perhaps most evident in his changing views on the Constitution. As the owner-publisher of a prominent newspaper and the public face of the African American abolition movement, Douglass might have worried that his transformation from zealous Garrisonian to committed antislavery constitutionalist would hurt his credibility, his readership, and the abolitionist cause. Nonetheless, he boldly and publicly denounced his previously held views, illustrating his willingness to reassess, critique, and challenge even his own positions. Douglass later endorsed this intellectual flexibility explicitly, insisting that “true stability consists not in being of the same opinion now as formerly, but in . . . the adoption or rejection of that which may seem to us true or false at the ever-present now” (2016f, 37). For Douglass (and for Douglassian citizens), intellectual open-mindedness is a virtue, and “the only truly consistent man is he who will, for the sake of being right today, contradict what he said wrong yesterday” (37).

Douglass’s aspirational rhetoric also provides a template for how Americans ought to understand their position in an increasingly cosmopolitan world. As discussed above, Douglass believes there is “no country where the conditions . . . for the development of right ideas . . . are more favorable than here in these United States” (2016d, 257). But like Lincoln—who, according to Ross, embodied “fervent support of both universal liberty and a particular historical nationality” (2009, 393)—Douglass fuses his nationalistic commitment with a universal perspective.²⁵ He insists, for instance, that Americans should seek guidance from the “great example” of England—a country that embodies “nobler ideas and principles of action” (Douglass 2016j, 280). And as Hooker notes, he “[finds] inspiration” from countries in Latin America and the Caribbean, which he views as “models of racial egalitarianism” (2015, 692).

This embrace of cosmopolitan influence does not undermine Douglass’s commitment to the United States, nor does it dilute his exceptionalism. In fact, he lauds international examples because he believes they will motivate the United States to achieve its own exceptional potential. For instance, Douglass describes England’s emancipation of the British West Indies as an event that “address[ed] itself . . . to the people of the United States” (2016j, 274). He laments

25. For further discussion of Lincoln’s nationalism and universalism, see Ross (2009).

that Americans “passed it by with averted eyes,” and he urges his countrymen to celebrate Britain’s accomplishment, expressing hope that one day “we shall have an American celebration to take its place” (281, 284). Douglass’s attitude toward Britain and other foreign examples is thus bound up with his exceptionalism: he embraces globalizing forces because they “link nations together” (2016m, 70); “[bring] to view” the progress of other, more enlightened nations (2016j, 280); and motivate America to improve.

This dual nationalist/universalist orientation illustrates how Americans can be both members of an exceptional nation and participants in a global world. Although—or perhaps because—he proudly “claim[s] American nationality” (Ross 2005, 357), Douglass willingly looks to other nations for inspiration, motivation, and guidance. As Ross and Hooker note, he embraces contact with the outside world, “value[s] heterogeneity” (Ross 2005, 358), and endorses a “self-consciously and cosmopolitan” politics (Hooker 2015, 696). His example encourages others to do likewise. Douglass’s cosmopolitan-yet-nationalistic exceptionalism demonstrates that national devotion need not be insular. Rather, devoted Americans can—and should—seek out and embrace opportunities to interact with and learn from the broader world.

Finally, Douglass models hopeful optimism. As Myers explains, Douglass believes “the moral laws of nature [are] self-executing” and that slavery, “the most egregious violation of [natural] law,” will inevitably “call upon itself crushing natural penalties” (2008, 15, 81). And so, though painfully aware of the “dark clouds” (Douglass 2016h, 107) that threaten America and its principles, Douglass remains focused on “what we ought to be” (2016e, 75). After lambasting the Dred Scott decision, for example, he reminds his audience that he is “morally certain that, sooner or later, . . . slavery is doomed to cease out of this otherwise goodly land” (2016d, 256). He also draws encouragement from “the nature of the American Government, the Constitution, the tendencies of the age, and the character of the American people” (257), explaining that he has “no fear for the ultimate triumph of free principles in this country” (Douglass 2016h, 107). Douglass does not assume this “triumph” will come easily, and he recognizes that America may be unable to fulfill its exceptional potential without “foul means,” “tumult” (2016d, 257), and a “dreadful struggle” (2016i, 321). Still he maintains a “rational hopefulness” for America’s future (Myers 2008, 81) and “envision[s] an America that, in being true to its founding principle of equality before the law, [is] ‘bending toward justice’” (Husband 2018, 232). By enacting this optimism, Douglass shows that citizens can, at once, be exasperated by the present and encouraged about what is to come. His rhetoric thus serves as a model for would-be aspirational exceptionalists, providing performative proof that “biting critique and deep devotion” can and should coexist (Buccola 2016, xix).

6. BEYOND RHETORIC: ASPIRATIONAL EXCEPTIONALISM AND ASPIRATIONAL CITIZENSHIP

Reading Douglass as an exceptionalist thinker uncovers a mode of exceptionalism that is neither uncritical, nor conservative, nor self-celebratory. Rather, my reading demonstrates that American exceptionalism can be radical, critical, self-reflective, and progressive—an orientation that takes seriously America's shortcomings and flaws but remains devoted to its excellent potential.

My analysis also offers a rethinking of Douglass and his political thought. Whereas existing studies tend to overlook Douglass's exceptionalism, I highlight his use of exceptionalist tropes. I thus provide a corrective to scholarship that presents Douglass as an apologist, anti-exceptionalist, or "dissenter" from "the myth of the Chosen Nation" (Hughes 2003, 11–13). This perspective enhances ongoing conversations about the effects and significance of Douglass's persuasive (Turner 2012, chap. 3; Hooker 2015; Turner 2018) and performative (Frank 2010; Zerilli 2016) rhetoric and provides a new perspective on his thought and politics—one attentive to his distinct fusion of celebration and critique, nationalism and universalism, devotion and radicalism.

These contributions are significant because they complicate prevailing conceptions of both American exceptionalism and Douglass. But my arguments also have important implications for the way Americans conceptualize and talk about citizenship. If American exceptionalism is an "ideal responsible for defining, supporting, and developing U.S. national identity" (Pease 2007, 109), then exceptionalist rhetoric shapes the way American citizens understand themselves and their relation to the world. Perhaps because of this, in the contemporary United States, American exceptionalism and citizenship norms are tightly linked: indeed, a "good" citizen is frequently understood to mean one who conforms with exceptionalist expectations.²⁶

Because accomplished exceptionalism remains a dominant discourse in the United States today, its self-celebratory and uncritical norms often provide the governing framework for American citizenship practices. Thinkers and public figures who are critical, who question the country's infallibility, or who believe that America has room to improve may be seen as poor exceptionalists and/or bad citizens, and they are sometimes accused of lacking exceptionalist commitments altogether. But excluding or repudiating aspirational exceptionalism in this way threatens to reinforce a society where critics and questioners are condemned as unpatriotic, and where a self-celebratory and uncritical

26. This is particularly true for America's political leaders, who are routinely assessed in terms of their accomplished exceptionalist commitments (or lack thereof). In 2016, for instance, one source observed that "just about every Republican presidential candidate [was] condemning Obama for a failure to grasp America's exceptional nature" (Jaffe 2015).

exceptionalist disposition is seen as the most correct and laudable way to enact American citizenship. Identifying and studying aspirational exceptionalists like Douglass thus does more than expand the American exceptionalist canon. It also creates room for more active, thoughtful, and progressive citizenship practices—behaviors inspired by and consistent with aspirational exceptionalism’s self-critical and ameliorative orientation.

If Frederick Douglass teaches us that American exceptionalist rhetoric need not always be celebratory, backward-looking, and banal, he also shows that American citizens need not always be self-assured or passive. Characterizing Frederick Douglass as an American exceptionalist thinker expands the boundaries of the exceptionalist rhetorical tradition while also broadening the range of “acceptable,” patriotic, and laudable citizenship practices. It creates room for critics, for parrhesiastes, for discontents, and for resisters, and it reminds (or, perhaps, teaches) us that good American citizens can be loud, disgruntled, radical, and defiant while remaining committed to the country and its future.

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