correspondents at large

Frederick Douglass, War, Haiti

ROBERT S. LEVINE

AT THE OUTSET OF HIS PUBLIC CAREER, WHEN HE WAS ALIGNED WITH WILLIAM LLOYD GARRISON'S AMERICAN ANTI-SLAVERY SOCIETY, FREDerick Douglass followed Garrison's lead in preaching the efficacy of moral suasion in the fight against slavery. Douglass elaborated his Garrisonian position in "My Opposition to War," an address delivered to the London Peace Society in May 1846, one year after Garrison published *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass*. A self-proclaimed "advocate of peace," Douglass declares unequivocally that "such is my deep, firm, conviction that nothing can be attained for liberty universally by war, that were I to be asked the question as to whether I would have my emancipation by the shedding of one single drop of blood, my answer would be in the negative" (*Frederick Douglass Papers* [*FDP*] 1: 262). Offering an example of what he terms "the demoniacal spirit of war," Douglass reports on how a New York iron worker and several women and children were killed by a bomb recently discovered from the British bombardment during the Revolutionary War. Then and now, he says, the loss of innocent life was a daily occurrence of "the demon, war" (263).

But what if slavery itself were regarded as "the demon, war"? In the late 1840s, Douglass began to rethink his position. "I am a peace man," he states in "Slavery, the Slumbering Volcano" (1849), "but I recognize in the Southern States at this moment . . . a *state of war*" (*FDP* 2: 153). Following the passage of the Fugitive Slave Act of 1850, Douglass once again declared his peace principles, but with a difference. "I am a peace man," he affirms in "Resistance to Blood-Houndism" (1851), "[b]ut if any one should attempt to take me into Slavery, I should strike him down—not with malignity, but as complacently as I would a bloodhound, and think I was doing God service" (*FDP* 2: 275, 276). When James Batchedler of Boston was killed in 1854 while attempting to remand Anthony Burns into slavery, Douglass applauded the act, stating that "his slaughter was as innocent, in the sight of God, as would be the slaughter of a ravenous wolf in the act of throttling an infant" (*Life and Writings of Frederick Douglass* [*LWFD*] 2: 287). That

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same year, Douglass began calling for violent resistance to the forces attempting to establish slavery in the Kansas-Nebraska territories. Although he made the pragmatic decision not to join with John Brown at Harpers Ferry in October 1859, he asserted in "John Brown and the Slaveholders' Insurrection" (1860) that slavery itself is a "standing insurrection from beginning to end" and that Brown therefore could be regarded as "a peace man" (*FDP* 3: 317). Douglass's conception of himself as this sort of "peace man" led him to embrace the Civil War as a war against proslavery "insurrectionists."

But even as Douglass during the late 1840s and 1850s increasingly called on blacks to "strike the blow" for their freedom (*FDP* 2: 89), he was aware that the specter of black violence only reinforced whites' stereotypes of black savagery. His shrewd ideological strategy in some of his speeches, especially those to primarily white audiences, was to present blacks' war against slavery as analogous to the American revolutionaries' war against England. Linking black revolutionaries to the earlier American revolutionaries was a familiar rhetorical move in abolitionist discourse, but Douglass's twist was to emphasize the relatively nonviolent or temperate nature of the American revolutionaries who fought the British. In his well-known "Fifth of July" lecture, "What to the Slave Is the Fourth of July" (1852), Douglass declares that the American revolutionaries "were peace men; but they preferred revolution to peaceful bondage" (*FDP* 2: 364–65). Although he proclaims in *My Bondage and My Freedom* (1855) that if the slave "kills his master, he imitates only the heroes of the revolution" (119), in this and his other autobiographical writings he represents his own use of violence to resist (but not kill) the slave breaker Covey as measured and self-defensive. Douglass does depict slaves as revolutionary killers in his 1853 novella "The Heroic Slave," but he takes pains to portray their leader, Madison Washington, as someone who kills only when absolutely necessary. Based on the 1841 revolt on the slaver *Creole*, in which blacks being transported from Virginia rose up against their enslavers, Douglass's novella tones down the violence by presenting Washington in the act of preserving the lives of the surviving whites after the blacks gain control of the ship. The white sailor Tom Grant, who survives the revolt because of Washington's intercession, later praises the black leader, declaring to his fellow white racists in Virginia that Washington was guided by nothing less than "the principles of 1776" (238).

But were Douglass's (and Madison Washington's) revolutionary principles actually based on the principles of 1776? To some extent, they clearly were. But much in Douglass's writings on war and resistance suggests that the Haitian revolutionaries of 1791–1804 also inspired his thinking about black revolution in the United States. Douglass was not alone among African Americans in finding inspiration in Haiti (Dixon). After all, the violent slave rebellion in Saint-Domingue against the powerful forces of the French, which resulted in the deaths of over fifty thousand whites and blacks, led to the establishment of the first black republic in the Americas and fundamentally transformed Atlantic slave culture. As David Walker, James Holly, and numerous other antebellum black leaders underscored, the Haitian Revolution taught slaves throughout the American hemisphere about the uses of violence to secure their freedom. Michel-Rolph Trouillot has influentially argued that "[i]n the United States, . . . with the notable exception of Henry Adams and W. E. B. Du Bois, few major writers conceded any significance to the Haitian Revolution in their historical writings up to the 1970s" (98–99). And yet Walker, Martin Delany, Holly, William Wells Brown, and many other African Americans directly addressed the Haitian Revolution in their historical and political writings. The surprise is that Douglass, known for his postracial politics, his American nationalism, and his general advocacy of nonviolence, saw in the Haitian

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Revolution a model for blacks who were fighting a war against slavery in the United States. In his lectures and essays on "the demon, war" in Haiti and the Caribbean, Douglass championed a politics of black revolutionary nationalism, with a particular emphasis on violence.

As early as 1846, Douglass spoke about the potentially liberating implications of a black revolutionary war in the United States resembling the Haitian Revolution, mocking white southerners for worrying that their supposedly content slaves might "enact some St. Domingo tragedy," while asserting that the slaveholders know full well "that three millions of hearts, upon which they are treading, are panting for emancipation" (*FDP* 1: 321). The very title of Douglass's speech, "Slavery, the Slumbering Volcano," evokes pent-up emancipatory desires, for the revolution in Saint-Domingue was regularly imaged in terms of volcanic imagery (Sale). In the same speech Douglass limns the racial dimensions of the rebellion on the *Creole* to occlude connections to the American Revolution, stating that the slave revolt was led by "a black man, with wooly head, high cheek bones, protruding lip, distended nostril, and retreating forehead" (*FDP* 2: 155). However much the patriotically named Madison Washington is analogized to temperate American revolutionaries, the black leader of "The Heroic Slave" ultimately finds common cause not with the white legatees of George Washington and James Madison but with the "*black* soldiers" and black "sympathizing spectators" (238, 239) who greet the *Creole*'s rebels in Nassau.[1] Douglass's sympathies for black warriors of the Caribbean also inform a number of his major speeches of the period, such as "The Significance of Emancipation in the West Indies" (1857), where he asserts that blacks won their freedom through "outbreaks and violence" that "kept the planters in a constant state of alarm and trepidation" (*FDP* 3: 207). In an 1860 speech, he declares that blacks in the United States should adopt similar tactics in their own war against slavery: "we must . . . reach the slaveholder's conscience through his fear of personal danger. We must make him feel that there is death in the air about him, that there is death in the pot before him, that there is death all around him" (416).

That same year Douglass celebrated the Haitian revolutionary Toussaint-Louverture as "the noble liberator and law giver of his brave and industrious people" (*FDP* 3: 297). In his numerous essays on Haiti appearing in *Douglass' Monthly* from the late 1850s to the time of the Civil War, Douglass regularly honored the "brave and industrious people" of Haiti and seemed tempted by the Haitian emigrationism of Holly, James Redpath, and Brown, among others (Levine 179–200). When Douglass canceled the trip to Haiti he had scheduled for May 1861 to devote himself to what he regarded as the emancipatory potential of the Civil War, he conveyed his admiration for Haitians who "won their freedom by arms" (*LWFD* 3: 87). Over the next several years, he called for policies that would help blacks in the United States win their own freedom by arms. For example, emphasizing that the pursuit of freedom in a war against enslavers inevitably requires the use of violence, he declares in "Notes on the War" (1861): "War was made to hurt, and those who provoke it ought to be hurt; and the only conceivable good which can come out of war, comes because it hurts" (*LWFD* 3: 116). In his 1862 "Fighting the Rebels with One Hand," he racializes his call for such hurting violence, stating that the Union army is "striking the guilty rebels with . . . [a] soft, white hand, when we should be striking with the iron hand of the black man" (*FDP* 3: 483). Under Lincoln's hesitant leadership, he maintained, the North was failing to do the job, and thus he regularly called for the formation of a black "*liberating army*" (*LWFD* 3: 94), which, in the tradition of black Caribbean revolutionaries, would wage war against white enslavers so that the violence would have a meaningful

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effect. In his 1863 broadside *Men of Color, to Arms!*, Douglass extends the racial, diasporic implications of his call for black freedom fighters, urging blacks to enlist in the Union army in the spirit of the black conspirator and revolutionary "Denmark Vesey of Charleston" (*LWFD* 3: 318), who in 1822 plotted to destroy Charleston, South Carolina, and flee with his black compatriots to Haiti.

Following the Civil War, Haiti continued to exert a surprising influence on Douglass's imagination. In an 1869 speech, "Let the Negro Alone," he hails Haiti as "the freest and mightiest Republic on the globe" (*FDP* 4: 204), and in an 1876 tribute he praises Lincoln for recognizing "the black Republic of Hayti, the special object of slaveholding aversion and horror" (*FDP* 4: 434). Although, much to the chagrin of Haitian leaders, he supported Ulysses Grant's failed effort during the early 1870s to annex Santo Domingo, when Douglass became United States minister resident and consul general to the Republic of Haiti in 1889, he gained numerous friends in the island nation by forestalling efforts to establish a United States naval base there. Pressured by United States officials to resign his position in 1891, he conveyed his admiration for the Haitians in an interview appearing in the 11 August 1891 *Washington Post*, sardonically noting that, prior to the Lincoln administration, "the United States refused to acknowledge the independence of Haiti on the ground that slaves had no right to rebel and cut their masters' throats" (*FDP* 5: 473). Grateful for Douglass's support, Haitian leaders appointed him to serve as their country's official representative at the Chicago World's Columbian Exposition in 1893.

And it was as Haiti's representative in Chicago that Douglass gave two of his most thoughtful speeches on war and the Haitian Revolution. In a speech delivered on 2 January 1893 to a predominantly black audience at Quinn Chapel, Douglass resoundingly affirms the centrality of the Haitian Revolution to the subsequent history of blacks in the Americas: "We should not forget that the freedom you and I enjoy to-day; that the freedom that eight hundred thousand colored people enjoy in the British West Indies; that the freedom that has come to the colored race the world over, is largely due to the brave stand taken by the black sons of Haiti ninety years ago." And in "Haiti among the Foremost Civilized Nations on Earth," which he delivered the same day at the Haitian pavilion, Douglass calls the Haitian Revolution "one of the most wonderful events in the history of this eventful century, and I may almost say, in the history of mankind." That revolution, he says, was led by "men of the negro race," "men who loved liberty more than life" (*FDP* 5: 506), men who, he acknowledged, at times resorted to extreme, even excessive, forms of retaliatory violence. In his influential twentieth-century history of the revolution in Saint-Domingue, C. L. R. James offers chilling descriptions of blacks torturing whites during the heat of war, even as he links that violence to the unspeakable white violence that elicited the blacks' vengeance: "Compared with what their masters had done to them in cold blood, what they did was negligible" (89). Douglass anticipates James in acknowledging atrocities on both sides while placing the blame on the whites: "impartial history records the fact, that every act of blood and torture committed by the Haitians during the war was more than duplicated by the French. The revolutionists did only what was essential to success in gaining their freedom and independence and what any other people assailed by such an enemy for such a purpose would have done" (*FDP* 5: 507).

By the late 1880s, Haiti had become a focal point for emotions that Douglass the Republican stalwart and political appointee was often forced to conceal: his sense of affiliation with blacks throughout the hemisphere, his rage at the persistence of white supremacism, and his conviction that black violence may still be necessary for "freedom and independence"

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in the United States. There is thus good reason to believe that Douglass had Haiti on his mind in his great 1894 antilynching speech, "Lessons of the Hour," when, shortly after he relinquished his position as Haiti's official representative, he imaged as a form of war "the blood chilling horrors and fiendish excesses perpetrated against the colored people by the so-called enlightened and Christian people of the South" (*FDP* 5: 578). Douglass concludes with the bold, warlike affirmation of a race man: "We have a fight on our hands right here, a fight for the whole race" (*FDP* 5: 598). Douglass had written in 1858 that "Slavery and Freedom are everywhere in the field face to face in open conflict, and the war one of extermination" (*FDP* 3: 233). Nearly forty years later and just a year before his death, Douglass confronted in the United States what still seemed to him the "demoniacal spirit of war," a war that required the spilling of blood and a war in which black freedom fighters could continue to find inspiration in the historical examples of revolutionaries both within and beyond the nation.

Note

1. On the diasporic implications of the novella, see Wilson.

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