

The Development of Frederick Douglass's Educational Program: Cultivating Human Beings to Live as Citizens

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Frederick Douglass's political project was to shape an America in which black and white people could live together in a common country enjoying equal rights as citizens. The institution of slavery was perpetuated by the claim that black people were naturally unfit for freedom by nature. Douglass rejected such assertions by appealing to the rational nature inherent in all human beings. While education had always been an intrinsic good for a rational person, it could also serve the practical purpose of changing the whites' perceptions of black people. Douglass's work on education began with industrial training to enable free blacks to possess practical skills for self-sufficiency. He would also argue for a kind of liberal education to improve the mind, particularly in the understudied 1894 speech, "The Blessings of Liberty and Education." I contend that an in-depth treatment of Douglass's program for education is necessary to accurately understand how he conceived of social and political life in America after the end of slavery.

David Blight's *Frederick Douglass: Prophet of Freedom* is a grand biography of the life of one of the greatest figures in American history, and it is the apex of Blight's prolific career.¹ He is the nation's most well-respected Douglass scholar, and the insights he offers into Douglass's personal life are illuminating for a student of Douglass at any level. However, this excellent treatment of Douglass's life and work does not have a single reference to "The Blessings of Liberty and Education," a speech that is not considered among Douglass's most famous but is among the most significant to understanding the role of education in his political thought. This absence is indicative of a larger gap in the scholarship regarding this particular speech and how his work on education developed in the years prior. The current scholarship covers aspects of Douglass's work on education, particularly providing his overarching principles on why education is necessary. However, no author has systematically treated Douglass's work on education over his entire career. This article will offer a corrective

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¹ David W. Blight, *Frederick Douglass: Prophet of Freedom* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2018).

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to the insufficient account of Douglass's educational program by tracing its development from his work promoting industrial training as a means for social mobility in the 1850s and 1860s to its culmination in a comprehensive cultivation of the mind in his 1894 "Blessings."

Over these decades, Douglass developed a philosophy of education that was both practical and philosophical. Education was indispensable to improving one's character. It could also raise one's status in a white-dominated society. Douglass recognized that enslaved black people had been shaped for subservience under slavery, so they required access to the sort of education befitting human beings and citizens. This article will provide a close examination of Douglass's writings to show how he adapted and changed his educational program to match the progress of blacks in society. By this education he hoped to achieve an America in which both blacks and whites could possess an American identity that transcends race, governing themselves as free human beings and citizens.

My argument that Douglass began with trades and then proceeded to account for a deeper cultivation of the mind is not the framing scholars have adopted and examined in a meaningful way. In his first book on Douglass, Blight comes closest to making the same case as this article. However, his account is relegated to a single section in a three-page treatment of the general importance of education in Douglass's reform project. "Since the 1850s," Blight describes, "Douglass had advocated manual labor schools and had preached the virtues of farming for blacks."² Blight explains that this strain of Douglass's work had led to him being "often cited as a precursor of the educational and social philosophy of Booker T. Washington."³ This is an accurate assessment that will be described in more detail later in this article. Blight continues, "Although there is ample evidence for this enduring strain in Douglass' thought advanced during Reconstruction and beyond, it is equally true that emancipation invoked a deeper, more classical educational vision from Douglass." He sets the general principle well here. Douglass supported industrial education for years and saw the need for a more intellectually rigorous education to develop the mind. Blight correctly argues that Douglass's 1865 speech "The Douglass Institute" is vital to showing Douglass's more comprehensive conception of education; nevertheless, he only cites this one speech to

² Blight, *Frederick Douglass' Civil War: Keeping Faith in Jubilee* (Baton Rouge, LA: Louisiana State University Press, 1989), 199.

³ Blight, *Frederick Douglass' Civil War*, 199.

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support his assertion. He also fails to provide a sufficient assessment of the habits of character Douglass believed would be formed under both industrial and classical approaches to education. While recognizing the dual nature of Douglass's educational philosophy, Blight does not treat the subject in depth: he simply notes there is "ample evidence" without providing examples. Nor does he account for the change in circumstances that corresponded to Douglass's change in emphasis on the type of education necessary for black elevation.

EDUCATION DENIED UNDER SLAVERY

Before proceeding to the analysis of Douglass's educational proposals, it is necessary to examine how Douglass's personal experience as an enslaved person shaped his views on why education is a core component of human freedom. Slavery intentionally transformed a man into a brute in a multitude of ways. One that is particularly emphasized by Douglass is how the institution required the enslaved to live in a state of ignorance. Education was problematic for the master because it would develop the rational capacity of the slave, and this would inevitably lead to resistance to the master's arbitrary, unjust rule over him. Douglass's desire for knowledge while he was a slave would shape his efforts to promote the education of blacks in the succeeding decades. In his telling, anything that led a slave to view himself beyond the borders of the master's domicile would pose an existential threat to slavery. This would remain the case even after slavery if educational opportunities were not given to the formerly enslaved people. Douglass made his claim about ignorance breeding subservience based on his firsthand experience. A telling example is his story about Sophia Auld. Douglass explained that Sophia, wife of master Hugh, had no slaves before her marriage, and she had made a living on her own. Sophia initially treated Douglass as she would a white child. Hugh Auld would soon initiate her into the ways of the slave system and change her character for the worse, demonstrating the necessity of slavery to degrade all parties involved.⁴ Sophia had introduced Douglass to the alphabet and taught him to spell simple words when her husband intervened. In Douglass's account, Hugh Auld exclaimed, "If you give a nigger an inch, he will take an ell. A nigger should know nothing but to obey his master—to do as he is told to

⁴ Frederick Douglass, *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass*, ed. John W. Blassingame, Peter P. Hinks, and John R. McKivigan, in *The Frederick Douglass Papers, Series Two: Autobiographical Writings*, 3 vols. (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1999–2012), 1:30–33.

do. Learning would *spoil* the best nigger in the world.”⁵ Douglass continually described how slavery depended upon the white man’s claim that the black man was not fully human. Auld’s argument for why a slave cannot be educated refutes his argument that a slave is subhuman. Blight conveys the significance of this part of Douglass’s story: “With his quest for literacy and the liberation of his mind, Douglass turned his own youth into one of the most profound meditations ever written on the character and the meaning of slavery, of the slaveholders’ mentality, and of human nature itself.”⁶ In Douglass’s formulation, an enslaved person could not be educated because it would enable him to conceive of himself as a human being. He thought man was suited for freedom by nature, and he had to be habituated to live in a system of servility. Sophia Auld similarly had to be educated in the ways of a slaveholder to no longer treat young Douglass as a normal child.

Slavery depended on circumventing the rational nature of both master and slave, making both unfit for freedom. However, it could not change the human natural impulse for freedom and knowledge. Nicholas Buccola describes Douglass’s argument on why this is the case: “Slaves are fit to be free because they are endowed with reason, possess the ability to tell right from wrong, and have free will to choose how they will act. Douglass believed that although slaves were raised in extraordinarily inhumane conditions, they retained their humanity and would, once liberated, be fit for self-government.”⁷ Douglass’s rational capacity was evident in his own quest for knowledge, even when his inclination to pursue knowledge was subverted under slavery. He recognized the importance of education to view himself as a person, although he had been told he was fit only for servitude by nature as a child. The lengths he went to attain knowledge reveal something about his nature that was opposed to servility. Valerie Smith notes that “the young boy does not yet understand the explicit connections between freedom and literacy, but he is inspired to learn to read and write by every means available to him.”⁸ We could also apply Smith’s assessment to the black Americans Douglass sought to help after emancipation. For Douglass, freedom was not simply the absence of chattel slavery. Rather, freedom entailed respect for oneself, and this

⁵ Douglass, *Life and Times of Frederick Douglass*, in *The Frederick Douglass Papers, Series Two*, 3:31.

⁶ Blight, *Prophet of Freedom*, 40.

⁷ Nicholas Buccola, *The Political Thought of Frederick Douglass: In Pursuit of American Liberty* (New York: New York University Press, 2012), 33.

⁸ Valerie Smith, “Born into Slavery: Echoes and Legacies,” in *The Cambridge Companion to Frederick Douglass*, ed. Maurice S. Lee (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), 177.

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would be attained through the cultivation of one's talents. Black people who did this would effectively counter the racist claim that they were unfit for citizenship due to an inherent inequality.

A reappraisal of oneself as a human being and citizen was necessary for blacks to be free in fact rather than simply on paper. However, this would prove to be very difficult. Buccola concludes, "The absence of a sense of possibility and hope, the very things that fuel the human desire for freedom, leaves the slave in a condition of deep despair."⁹ Douglass's own rise from slave to prominent orator revealed that the dehumanizing effects of slavery could be overcome, and he used his story to help blacks transcend this sense of despair to conceive of themselves as possessing the natural right to liberty. Scholars have done well in providing accounts of this and other formative experiences for the young Douglass; however, they have not sufficiently linked this personal desire for knowledge with his more practical work for education for black Americans. A good example of this is Peter Myers, who writes, "By learning what slaveholders opposed or what slavery systematically negated, Douglass learned what to affirm."¹⁰ While Myers is certainly correct, this article will fill a gap in scholarship by connecting Douglass's positive ideas of what to affirm to his lengthy and evolving project for black education. Hardly a peripheral goal, it was a primary focus for nearly five decades.

STRIVING FOR MORE THAN MENIAL WORK

Douglass consistently urged black people to actively strive for elevation beyond their present circumstances. He made this plea even while the circumstances for free blacks was not ideal, and slavery remained legal throughout the South. It was no small request at the time, but his striving for knowledge and personal freedom while enslaved could serve as an inspiration to his audience. The literacy rate of free black people conveys the context of Douglass's appeal to free blacks. From 1840 to 1930, the US Census, the only large-scale measure of literacy, asked whether people older than age 10 in the house were literate. In 1850, before Emancipation, it reported that "36% of free Blacks were illiterate."¹¹ Scholars estimate that

⁹ Buccola, *The Political Thought of Frederick Douglass*, 27.

¹⁰ Peter C. Myers, *Frederick Douglass: Race and the Rebirth of American Liberalism* (Lawrence, KS: University Press of Kansas, 2008), 20-21.

¹¹ Dale J. Cohen, Sheida White, and Steffaney B. Cohen, "Mind the Gap: The Black-White Literacy Gap in the National Assessment of Adult Literacy and Its Implications," *Journal of Literacy Research* 44, no. 2 (June 2012): 125.

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“illiteracy among slaves was ... 90%.”¹² For Douglass, literacy was necessary for freedom, and too many free blacks were illiterate. He told black people that they would need to take an active role in bettering themselves, including laboring for their rights and educating their children. As he argued in an 1848 editorial, “We deserve no earthly or heavenly blessing, for which we are unwilling to labor. For our part, we despise a freedom and equality obtained for us by others, and for which we have been unwilling to labor. A man who would not labor to gain his rights, is a man who would not, if he had them, prize and defend them.”¹³ Douglass thought they had to understand the value of freedom for it to be maintained. He acknowledged that formal institutions of learning were not sufficiently accessible, so he encouraged black parents to do what they could to improve their own knowledge within the family structure: “Let us educate our children, even though it should us subject to a coarser and scantier diet, and disrobe us of our few fine garments. ‘For the want of knowledge we are killed all the day.’ Get wisdom—get understanding, is a peculiarly valuable exhortation to us, and the compliance with it is our only home in this land.”¹⁴ Black people must conceive of themselves as free people to be able to live freely in America. This would require them to fulfill Douglass’s exhortation to “get wisdom.” Douglass believed blacks could live as people of decent character even while they were not able to access the same schoolhouse as whites. As he explained, “Our oppressors have divested us of many valuable blessings and facilities for improvement and elevation; but, thank heaven, they have not yet been able to take from us the privileges of being honest, industrious, sober and intelligent.”¹⁵ Douglass thought they could still improve themselves if they made a concerted effort to act as individuals possessing good character, and this accent on the individual would be a consistent element of his appeals to free blacks before and after national emancipation.

In Douglass’s writings, the importance of black workers doing their jobs well to elevate their status in a white-dominated society cannot be overstated. He thought blacks needed to receive industrial training first to be able to labor in more skilled occupations appropriate for a free person instead of being relegated to menial tasks easily performed by anyone who was

¹² Cohen, White, and Cohen, “Mind the Gap,” 124.

¹³ Douglass, “What are the Colored People Doing for Themselves?” *The North Star*, July 14, 1848, in *The Life and Writings of Frederick Douglass*, ed. Philip S. Foner, 5 vols. (New York: International Publisher, 1950), 1:316.

¹⁴ Douglass, “What are the Colored People Doing for Themselves?” 319.

¹⁵ Douglass, “What are the Colored People Doing for Themselves?” 319-20.

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physically able. He argued that a sense of self-worth could be attained through hard work, specifically when engaging in worthwhile trades: "It is impossible for us to attach too much importance to this aspect of the subject. Trades are important. Wherever a man may be thrown by misfortune, if he has in his hands a useful trade, he is useful to his fellow man, and will be esteemed accordingly; and of all men in the world who need trades we are the most needy."¹⁶ Douglass believed that material independence was necessary for black people to later be able to pursue higher endeavors on a greater scale. He stressed that meaningful improvement would come when a broad base of the free black population could demonstrate they were capable workers and then carry themselves as community members worthy of respect. While Douglass acknowledged that the negative view of blacks held by whites was rooted in prejudice instead of truth, he had to adapt a strategy to effectively counter this prejudice. He gave examples of menial labors blacks commonly performed which could soon be deemed unnecessary by whites: "A man is only in a small degree dependent on us when he only needs his boots blacked, or his carpet bag carried; as a little less pride, and a little more industry on his part, may enable him to dispense with our services entirely."¹⁷ Douglass thought that blacks' status in society would be improved if whites perceived them to be an integral part of the community, and this could most immediately be done through engaging in a trade.

Black people needed to produce goods themselves instead of caring for goods produced and owned by others. Douglass wanted them to look forward to a better future, and he thought this would only occur when they first realized why they needed to engage in more lasting professions. "What shall a large class of our fellow countrymen do," asked Douglass, "when white men find it economical to black their own boots, and shave themselves? What will they do when white men learn to wait on themselves? We warn you brethren, to seek other and more enduring vocations."¹⁸ Blacks were relegated to the jobs that most people could do on their own without any special training, he argued. The problem was not simply that their jobs could be easily replaced but also that it would further a narrative that blacks were unable to perform skilled labor and pursue higher professions. Peter Myers describes

¹⁶ Douglass, "An Address to the Colored People of the United States," *The North Star*, September 29, 1848, in *Life and Writings*, 1:334.

¹⁷ Douglass, "An Address to the Colored People of the United States," 335.

¹⁸ Douglass, "An Address to the Colored People of the United States," 335.

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why Douglass so fervently opposed menial employment: “They were especially to be avoided in a climate of opinion in which African Americans’ relative confinement to such occupations perpetuated the prejudice that as a class, they were naturally capable of no more demanding and elevating work.”¹⁹ Douglass thought proficiency in a dignified occupation elevated the individual and the race. This argument for trade education is reasonable given the conditions black people faced. However, Waldo Martin objects to Douglass’s industrial training proposals: “Ironically, Douglass’s blatantly color-conscious call for mechanical training among black youth in particular, by possibly separating them off into a special mechanical education track, contradicted and might have impeded the egalitarian goals of an integrated public school education.”²⁰ Martin views the argument for industrial training as insufficient for the integrated public schools that Douglass thought to be the ideal. It is true that Douglass’s work for trades could be viewed as base or quaint today, but Douglass sincerely thought he was devising a workable path to elevation given the suboptimal circumstances. This industrial education was a necessary step because it would help blacks attain a better standing in society and improve the prospects for integrated education.

To be clear, Douglass did not argue that black people should only engage in trade work, but he did maintain that a greater number of black tradesmen was vital to improving the condition of the race generally. These trades represented the sort of work that most free men of other races did in America, and he did not view them as insignificant or base. Rather, Douglass thought that black people who engaged in trades demonstrated their manhood to a white populace disinclined to view them as men. In his speech “What to the Slave is the Fourth of July?” Douglass asked why black people must prove their manhood when they have shown themselves to be capable workers in various fields: “Is it not astonishing ... while we are engaged in all manner of enterprises common to other men ... living in families as husbands, wives and children, and, above all, confessing and worshipping the Christian’s God, and looking hopefully for life and immortality beyond the grave, we are called upon to prove that we are men!”²¹ Douglass provided a long list of occupations that blacks had already

¹⁹ Myers, *Race and the Rebirth*, 179.

²⁰ Waldo E. Martin, Jr., *The Mind of Frederick Douglass* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1984), 192.

²¹ Douglass, “What to the Slave is the Fourth of July?: An Address Delivered in Rochester, New York, on 5 July 1852,” in *The Frederick Douglass Papers, Series One: Speeches, Debates, and Interviews*, ed. John W. Blassingame, 4 vols. (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1982), 2:370.

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been performing, from farm work to building infrastructure to law and medicine. Those who possessed talent had shown themselves capable of doing the same work as whites. However, they did not have the equal opportunity to excel in the numbers Douglass believed they would in the future.

The lower status of black people in America was not due to some fault within their nature, as alleged by certain whites. They could do the same work, raise stable families, and worship the same God as whites because they were human beings naturally suited to do so. For Douglass, this similarity was what was worth mentioning, not scientific efforts to perceive racial difference. As he declared in an 1854 commencement address, "I say it is remarkable—nay, it is strange that there should arise a phalanx of learned men—speaking in the name of *science*—to forbid the magnificent reunion of mankind in one brotherhood."²² This brotherhood that Douglass sought to cultivate rested on the assertion that human beings were fundamentally equal in their natures: "[Man's] speech, his reason, his power to acquire and to retain knowledge, his heaven-erected face, his habitudes, his hopes, his fears, his aspirations, his prophecies, plant between him and the brute creation, a distinction as eternal as it is palpable."²³ Douglass believed that human beings were defined by their rational nature and moral capacity. All human beings were endowed by their creator with certain characteristics that make them distinct from the other animals. Gayle McKeen offers a simple but generally accurate statement on Douglass's conception of race: "For Douglass, race was an incidental and not essential characteristic of individuals."²⁴ Douglass thought that one's status as a human being was of far greater significance than ethnic background, and the emphasis on particular races led to unnecessary conflict generally designed to promote a superior and inferior race.

Waldo Martin objects to Douglass's downplaying of racial identity. He argues that Douglass wanted blacks to progress, but he also required them to make some sacrifices relating to their identity and culture: "In his view, Negro Americans, notably the southern Negro, constituted mostly a landless and oppressed peasantry in need of social, economic,

²² Douglass "The Claims of the Negro Ethnologically Considered: An Address Delivered in Hudson, Ohio on 12 July 1854," *The Frederick Douglass Papers, Series One*, 2:503-504.

²³ Douglass "The Claims of the Negro Ethnologically Considered," 502.

²⁴ Gayle McKeen, "Whose Rights? Whose Responsibility? Self-Help in African-American Thought," *Polity* 34, no. 4 (Summer 2002): 413.

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and political opportunity. The major cultural issue, according to Douglass, was Afro-American acculturation to Anglo-American values, norms, and institutions.”²⁵ Martin believes that Douglass wanted blacks to shed their distinct culture to better fit within white society, thus he put the burden on the oppressed people. But this is not an accurate depiction of what Douglass sought. He did not think blacks should act “more white” and shed their distinct culture. Rather, Douglass thought he was seeking for blacks what was best by nature for human beings generally in his promotion of the character required for self-government. Martin is wrong to claim that Douglass’s program resulted from an “Anglo-European cultural bias.”²⁶ Material and moral prosperity were good for human beings regardless of race.

EARLY ARGUMENTS FOR INDUSTRIAL EDUCATION

While Douglass did highlight how some blacks had been able to prove themselves as apt workers in a variety of fields, the number of them who had done so was insufficient. The solution was not simply for more black people to pursue higher education. On the contrary, Douglass argued in 1853’s “Learn Trades or Starve!” that pursuing academic knowledge was counterproductive at this stage for many people. There were other more pressing skills they needed to learn as they transitioned to live in a position of freedom. While Douglass fervently argued that blacks were equal human beings by nature, this editorial focused on how people are valued by others for what they do in practice. A prejudiced white person would not be swayed by a rational argument stating why black people were human beings of equal worth. The white man needed to be shown what the black man could do in order to disprove prejudice. Douglass explained that going to work would be the solution: “We tell you to go to work; and to work you must go or die. Men are not valued in this country, or in any country, for what they *are*; they are valued for what they can *do*. It is in vain that we talk about being men, if we do not do the work of men.”²⁷ Much like he had argued in 1848, he emphasized why blacks must work to prove their value in society and to learn new skills to permit them to do more than menial jobs: “We must do that we can *do* as well as *be*; and to this end we must learn trades. When we can build as well as live in houses; when we can

²⁵ Martin, *The Mind of Frederick Douglass*, 222.

²⁶ Martin, *The Mind of Frederick Douglass*, 224.

²⁷ Douglass, “Learn Trades or Starve!” *Frederick Douglass’ Paper*, March 4, 1853, in *The Life and Writings of Frederick Douglass*, 2:224.

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make as well as *wear* shoes; when we can produce as well as consume wheat, corn and rye—then we shall become valuable to society.”²⁸ The importance of making the things necessary for life cannot be overstated. Black people, in Douglass’s estimation, needed to shape raw materials into products they could use and sell, permitting them to be more self-sufficient and engage in commerce with whites, which would breed better relations between the races. This principled argument for racial elevation through trades prefigures the work of one of Douglass’s successors as another advocate for his race, Booker T. Washington. Peter Myers succinctly compares Douglass’s argument for trades to Washington’s: “The learning of trades was for Douglass what it was for Washington—an imperative of self-defense and a broadly accessible means of cultivating some essential liberal virtues, such as industry and self-reliance.”²⁹ Douglass agreed with Washington on the need for trades as a means of self-improvement, but Douglass also offered a deeper account of the human person in his educational philosophy that extended well beyond trades.

According to Douglass, a more general diffusion of education in the higher fields of knowledge would have to wait. As Waldo Martin explains, “He thought a mechanical education more relevant than a classical education to the need of a people, like Negroes, struggling to overcome the impact of slavery.”³⁰ In fact, Douglass argued that blacks who were classically educated faced particular hardships of their own. Since they were deemed members of an inferior race, they would have to fight to work in occupations that correlated to their allegedly lower intellectual capacities. “An educated colored man, in the United States,” Douglass elaborated, “unless he has within him the heart of a hero, and is willing to engage in a life-long battle for his rights, as a man, finds new inducements to remain in this country.”³¹ The best and brightest will face obstacles in an acute manner. For Douglass, they had a special role in persuading other blacks to elevate themselves using the means available to them: “We, therefore, call upon the intelligent and thinking ones amongst us, to urge upon the colored people within their reach, in all seriousness, the duty and the necessity of giving their children useful and lucrative trades, by which they may commence the battle of life with

²⁸ Douglass, “Learn Trades or Starve!” 224.

²⁹ Myers, *Race and the Rebirth*, 180; see Martin, *The Mind of Frederick Douglass*, 192, and Blight, *Frederick Douglass’ Civil War*, 199.

³⁰ Martin, *The Mind of Frederick Douglass*, 192.

³¹ Douglass, “Learn Trades or Starve!” *Life and Writings*, 2:225.

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weapons commensurate with the exigencies of the conflict.”³² The average person would likely hold the most intelligent among them in esteem. Douglass wanted the best and brightest to see that the most good would come when their fellow blacks received industrial training. This more educated group may have deemed industrial training as beneath them, but Douglass argued they should set aside this pride and encourage industrial training for the benefit of their race. Douglass aligns with W.E.B. Du Bois in this particular emphasis on the role of the most naturally gifted to serve as leaders for the elevation of fellow members of their race. Du Bois wrote, “The problem of education, then, among Negroes must first of all deal with the Talented Tenth; it is the problem of developing the Best of this race that they may guide the Mass away from the contamination and death of the Worst, in their own and other races.”³³ Douglass departs from Du Bois in his belief that racial uplift would mostly arise from the bottom-up instead of the top-down, as is evident in his promotion of trades, but they did share a common view on the importance of the development of the mind as indispensable for human flourishing.

Douglass builds on the arguments of “Learn Trades or Starve!” in a letter to Harriet Beecher Stowe written to raise support for an industrial college. According to Benjamin Quarles, this letter was written after he visited Stowe at her home in Andover, Massachusetts: “An admirer of Douglass, and impressed by his enthusiasm for the manual labor college, she requested him to put his views in writing so that she might show the letter to interested persons abroad.”³⁴ David Blight notes that Douglass “wrote of the encounter as a magical experience.”³⁵ This letter was ostensibly written to Stowe, but it also must be viewed as targeting a white European audience who would help to fund this institution. Douglass described in great detail the problems facing black America and why an industrial college would be instrumental in solving them. The problems facing free blacks were threefold: “I assert then, that *poverty*, *ignorance* and *degradation* are the combined evil or, in other words, these constitute the social disease of the Free Colored people in the United States.”³⁶ The

³² Douglass, “Learn Trades or Starve!” *Life and Writings*, 2:225.

³³ W.E.B. Du Bois, “The Talented Tenth” in *W.E.B. Du Bois: Writings*, ed. Nathan Huggins (New York: Library of America, 1986), 842.

³⁴ Benjamin Quarles, *Frederick Douglass* (New York: Atheneum, 1976), 130.

³⁵ Blight, *Prophet of Freedom*, 247.

³⁶ Douglass to Harriet Beecher Stowe, March 8, 1853, in *The Frederick Douglass Papers, Series Three: Correspondence*, ed. John R. McKivigan, 4 vols. (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2018), 2:11. In “The

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school Douglass envisioned would teach blacks the necessary skills to be employed in a productive job and to acquire the basic manners of civilized people. Douglass emphasized the need for gradual elevation instead of pursuing the highest positions immediately: “Accustomed, as we have been, to the rougher and harder modes of living, and of gaining a livelihood, we cannot, and we ought not to hope that, in a single leap from our low condition, we can reach that of *Ministers, Lawyers, Doctors, Editors, Merchants &c.*”³⁷ While in “What to the Slave is the Fourth of July?” Douglass had mentioned that members of his race have proven themselves capable of these noble professions, he took a more measured stance in this letter to account for the general station of blacks in society in the decade before the Civil War. He explained, “These [occupations] will, doubtless, be attained by us; but this will only be, when we have patiently and laboriously, and I may add successfully, mastered and passed through the intermediate gradations of agriculture and the mechanic arts.”³⁸ Douglass emphasized that he wanted no “artificial elevation” to these positions but rather a state of “fair play.”³⁹ The best course to attain loftier positions would be gradual advancement instead of a top-down arrangement.

Douglass thought the black people who had attended institutions of higher education lacked some basic skills necessary for self-sufficiency. “Yet few, comparatively,” he posited, “have acquired a classical education; and even this few have found themselves educated far above a living condition, there being no methods by which they could turn their learning to account.”⁴⁰ They were educated for careers they may not have access to given the circumstances of the day. While there were black lawyers and ministers, Douglass claimed they were not necessarily the best in their fields. “White people will not employ them to the obvious embarrassment of their causes,” he described, “and the blacks, taking their *cue* from the whites, have not sufficient confidence in their abilities to employ them.”⁴¹ It was more pressing for blacks to demonstrate excellence in a given trade than be represented in higher professions. The opinion of whites regarding these black professionals would then have an

Industrial College,” January 2, 1854, *Life and Writings*, 2:273–74, Douglass described the plight of blacks in the same terms, and he said that Stowe had decided not to support his proposal for the establishment of an industrial college.

³⁷ Douglass to Harriet Beecher Stowe, *Frederick Douglass Papers, Series Three*, 2:11.

³⁸ Douglass to Harriet Beecher Stowe, 11.

³⁹ Douglass to Harriet Beecher Stowe, 11.

⁴⁰ Douglass to Harriet Beecher Stowe, 12.

⁴¹ Douglass to Harriet Beecher Stowe, 13.

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impact on how blacks viewed themselves.⁴² According to Douglass, the black lawyer and minister were viewed as a cheaper, less capable alternative by some whites. He thought gradual elevation would help prevent this view of black professionals as an inferior option from taking greater hold. Blacks could more easily earn distinction and be perceived as excellent in the trades before contending with more established whites in loftier occupations.

Douglass said that he would leave the details of the curriculum to others, but he did have a broad conception of how the industrial college would serve its students. This would be “a college where colored youth can be instructed to use their hands, as well as their heads; where they can be put into possession of the means of getting a living whether their lot in after life may be cast among civilized or uncivilized men.”⁴³ While Douglass had focused on utility before, here he addressed how the mind would be trained while *also* preparing students for a trade. The students at the school would be free blacks, but he saw their education as vital for those who were still enslaved. “The most telling, the most killing refutation of slavery,” he argued, “is the presentation of an industrious, enterprising, thrifty, and intelligent free black population. Such a population I believe would rise in the Northern States under the fostering care of such a college as that supposed.”⁴⁴ His effort to help free blacks in the North was also a way to have the whites see blacks as human beings who were capable of citizenship. The institution of slavery in the South and the lack of equal opportunity for blacks to advance in the North were intertwined. The North had permitted slavery, and most whites there viewed blacks indifferently or negatively. Black people could apply the skills learned through industrial education in their occupations to provide a strong counter to negative stereotypes.

THE SYMBOLIC SIGNIFICANCE OF THE DOUGLASS INSTITUTE

Douglass’s 1865 speech commemorating the opening of a school named in his honor, the Douglass Institute, provides more details on why he thought industrial training remained important over a decade after he began to advocate for such training in earnest. He planned a truly comprehensive education, beyond that of developing the physical body to perform a

⁴² See W.E.B. Du Bois, *The Souls of Black Folk*, 1903, in *W.E.B. Du Bois: Writings*, 363. Du Bois would coin the phrase “double consciousness” to encapsulate the phenomenon Douglass is describing here. He wrote, “It is a peculiar sensation, this double-consciousness, this sense of always looking at one’s self through the eyes of others, of measuring one’s soul by the tape of the world that looks on in amused contempt and pity.”

⁴³ Douglass to Harriet Beecher Stowe, *Frederick Douglass Papers*, Series Three, 2:15.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, 2:16.

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task to earn a wage. Douglass addresses both themes in this speech and uses a loftier rhetoric than his earlier work for industrial education. In the words of David Blight, "Douglass crafted a beautiful address about the nature of education, civilization, and lives characterized by pursuits of the mind and soul and not merely by laborer's brawn."⁴⁵ Black Americans who strived to learn in accordance with the cultivation of the mind and good character would help to rebuff prejudiced narratives about them. At the same time, Douglass pointed out the hardships that blacks faced when denied access to institutions of learning: "A people hitherto pronounced by American learning as incapable of any thing higher than the dull round of merely animal life ... dare here and now to establish an Institute, devoted to all the higher wants and aspirations of the human soul."⁴⁶ The founding of the Douglass Institute represented a substantial effort taken by black people to attain a better life for themselves. Douglass noted a shift in their mindset: "It implies that the colored people of Baltimore not only have the higher qualities attributed to the white race, but that they are awakening to a healthy consciousness of those qualities in themselves, and that they are beginning to see, as the dark cloud of slavery rolls away, the necessity of bringing those qualities into vigorous exercise."⁴⁷ Both the individuals who founded the school and those who wanted to attend it demonstrated that blacks were willing and able to elevate themselves and overcome the brutal existence of striving for basic subsistence they had been relegated to under slavery.

The Douglass Institute was founded in 1865 in Baltimore, Maryland. The time and location were both noteworthy: "The establishment of an Institute bearing my name by the colored people in the city of my boyhood, so soon after the act of emancipation in this State, looms before me as a *first* grand indication of progress."⁴⁸ While Douglass treats the founding of this school as a touchstone moment, the year 1865 was significant historically. The Freedmen's Bureau was established on March 3, 1865, and the Civil War officially concluded on May 26, 1865. Douglass uses a positive tone in this message delivered after Union victory, but he, with the Radical Republicans, was aware of the plight of the formerly enslaved and the need to use the mechanism of the national government to aid in the elevation of black people. The purpose of the Freedmen's Bureau was to materially aid the

⁴⁵ Blight, *Prophet of Freedom*, 469, also notes that there were eight hundred people in attendance for the address.

⁴⁶ Douglass, "The Douglass Institute," October 1865, in *The Life and Writings of Frederick Douglass*, 4:176.

⁴⁷ Douglass, "The Douglass Institute," 177.

⁴⁸ Douglass, "The Douglass Institute," 175.

formerly enslaved living in the South in transition to freedom. Blight describes the conditions field agents observed in the South at the time: “Freedmen’s Bureau agents reported over and over again about violence against ex-slaves, including whippings, ritualistic torture, and murders.”⁴⁹ These conditions in the Deep South were present at the same time Douglass expressed his optimism about the school. Robert Levine provides a reminder of why a school had to be established especially for blacks: “Situated at the site of a former university, the Douglass Institute was founded by a group of Baltimore African Americans with the goal of educating Black youth in a venue sheltered from the city’s pervasive anti-Black racism.”⁵⁰ Even though there was racism in the city, there was good reason for Douglass’s optimism. He was able to inaugurate an institution founded by black people for their own education. As Douglass declared, “It is an indication of the rise of a people long oppressed, enslaved and bound in the chains of ignorance, to a freer place and higher plane of life, manhood, usefulness and civilization.”⁵¹ Douglass acknowledges the adversity black people have faced due to slavery and prejudice, but he also conveys a general hope that they would be able to elevate themselves through the pursuit of education. Blight notes, “Douglass wished that separate black schools and associations were not necessary. But he accepted reality and used them as the source of a brilliant critique of racism.”⁵² It was good for all people to be better educated. For a time, this would have to be done within separate institutions.

While the Douglass Institute catered to black students specifically, Douglass wanted schools to eventually be mixed-race in composition. He viewed this assimilation as essential for whites and blacks to learn how to live together in a shared country. If whites and blacks attended separate schools, in Douglass’s estimation, the education would not be equal, and

⁴⁹ Blight, *Prophet of Freedom*, 473. Douglass was certainly aware of the serious risk of black people becoming de facto re-enslaved if the country failed to see Radical Reconstruction through to its completion (471). According to Robert S. Levine, *The Failed Promise: Reconstruction, Frederick Douglass, and the Impeachment of Andrew Johnson* (New York: W.W. Norton, 2021), 81, Douglass’s concern that the nation would not integrate black people as citizens, was tempered by his hope based on the course of action pursued by the Radical Republicans. On the treatment black people faced at the hands of whites who did not take well to the national government enforcing emancipation, W.E.B. Du Bois, *Black Reconstruction in America: An Essay Toward a History of the Part Which Black Folk Played in the Attempt to Reconstruct Democracy in America, 1860–1880* (New York: Harcourt, Brace and Company, 1935), 673: “The unrest and bitterness of post-war lawlessness were gradually transmuted into economic pressure. Systematic effort was made by the owners to put the Negro to work, and equally determined effort by the poor whites to keep him from work which competed with them or threatened their future work and income.”

⁵⁰ Levine, *The Failed Promise*, 76.

⁵¹ Douglass, “The Douglass Institute,” *Life and Writings*, 4:176.

⁵² Blight, *Prophet of Freedom*, 470.

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the prejudiced claim that blacks were inferior and less intelligent would be perpetuated more easily. He even claimed the interests of the poor whites and poor blacks were “identical.”⁵³ Waldo Martin writes, “Douglass often stressed the importance of socialization and education, especially in a multiracial society like the United States, as a way to help people accept different races of people as an equal and integral part of humanity. This was particularly significant for the training of the youth.”⁵⁴ Douglass thought America was rightly the home of blacks and whites. A common conception of a shared home could begin to take hold with children learning together in a shared educational enterprise. Nicholas Buccola addresses the significance of students studying in the same setting: “Douglass viewed the schoolhouse as an important site of character formation. Just being present at that site with others, he thought, could serve as the basis to strengthen the bonds of community. It was for that reason that he was so adamant about the need for racial integration.”⁵⁵ Poor whites in the South had been taught that they were superior to blacks, and the best way to disprove this claim was for blacks and whites to engage as equals in the classroom at a young age. Douglass explained, “Educate the poor white children and the colored children together; let them grow up to know that color makes no difference as to the rights of a man; that both the black man and the white man are at home; that the country is as much the country of one as of the other, and that both together must make it a valuable country.”⁵⁶ Douglass wanted whites and blacks both to see why each had a contribution to make in this country. They possessed the rights and corresponding duties of citizens. Part of the lower-class whites’ poor treatment of blacks was an attempt to make themselves feel superior due to their own lowly status.

SUSTAINED EFFORT REQUIRED FOR MASS ELEVATION

Douglass’s work for technical training depended on black people having the will to start these institutions and a desire to improve themselves individually. This concept was contained in his works on industrial schools, and Douglass addressed it in greater depth in his lecture “Self-Made Men.” A human being, he argued, has a natural desire to learn, and the pursuit of knowledge offers a better understanding of oneself. Man, he said, can observe and

⁵³ Douglass, “Mixed Schools,” *The New National Era*, May 2, 1872, in *Life and Writings*, 4:289.

⁵⁴ Martin, Jr. *The Mind of Frederick Douglass*, 134.

⁵⁵ Buccola, *The Political Thought of Frederick Douglass*, 152.

⁵⁶ Douglass, “Mixed Schools,” *Life and Writings*, 4:289

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contemplate great beauty in nature, art, and science; however, “no matter how radiant the colors, how enchanting the melody, how gorgeous and splendid the pageant; man himself, with eyes turned inward upon his own wondrous attributes and powers surpasses them all.”⁵⁷

Douglass raised the point of the majesty inherent in mankind at the beginning of the address to prepare his audience for the great task he would urge them to perform: Man is capable of great deeds even when such a life appears to be impossible. Other scholars have examined “Self-Made Men,” but they tend not to refer to it as part of his broader work on education. This is a mistake because the qualities Douglass said were possessed by the self-made man are promoted throughout his work on education.

Early in the speech, Douglass reminds his audience that a firm foundation in knowledge must be established to cultivate the character necessary to respond effectively to challenges that will arise in an individual's life. A human being is not like other animals because a person is not governed by instinct alone. “The importance of this knowledge is immeasurable,” Douglass elaborated, “and by no other is human life so affected and colored. Nothing can bring to man so much of happiness or so much of misery as man himself.”⁵⁸ Douglass stresses a theme that is more implicit in most of his earlier work: Happiness is attained through the pursuit of knowledge of various kinds. Man's happiness can endure when he has this kind of self-knowledge. Man can be miserable if he does not choose to do what is natural, pleasurable, and fulfilling. It is also due to the human capacity to reason that man has a conception of the present and eternity. As Douglass explains, A human being “is the prolific constituter of manners, morals, religions and governments. He spins them out as the spider spins his web, and they are coarse or fine, kind or cruel, according to the degree of intelligence reached by him at the period of their establishment.”⁵⁹ This is in accordance with his view that one of man's great abilities is to assess the past and use that knowledge to shape the future. The conditions of the public mind at a given time are reflected in their way of life contained in their dual roles as human beings and citizens. Douglass further describes, “It is the faith of the race that in man there exists far outlying continents of power, thought and

⁵⁷ Douglass, “Self-Made Men: An Address Delivered in Carlisle, Pennsylvania, in March 1893,” in *The Frederick Douglass Papers, Series One*, 5:547.

⁵⁸ Douglass, “Self-Made Men,” 547.

⁵⁹ Douglass, “Self-Made Men,” 548.

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feeling, which remain to be discovered, explored, cultivated, made practical and glorified.”⁶⁰ There was still more to learn, according to Douglass. This made the process of self-discovery rewarding to the person willing to develop his rational capacity and apply it in the conduct of his everyday life. Blight is critical of some of the rhetoric of “Self-Made Men,” arguing that it “is at times knitted together by lines that read like platitudes in a young man’s advice manual.”⁶¹ But this criticism comes from the perspective of a modern reader who finds Douglass’s emphasis on work to be quaint. A more guided interpretation will properly account for the circumstances in which Douglass spoke and his intended audience. To be sure, his emphasis on work leading to success was idealistic and aspirational, but perhaps he believed it was what his audience needed to hear to overcome the obstacles they faced.

In large part due to “Self-Made Men,” Douglass has been cited as an expositor of rugged individualism akin to contemporary libertarians, but this is an overly simplistic conclusion. He saw the bettering of each individual person as in service to mankind more broadly. Nick Bromell observes that “even in his lecture ‘Self-Made Men,’ which many readers take to be an unequivocal celebration of individualism, Douglass is careful to stress the importance of ‘inter-dependence and brotherhood’ as a *condition* of individuality.”⁶² In Douglass’s view, mankind was not and could never be completely atomized. He explained, “It must in truth be said, though it may not accord well with self-conscious individuality and self-conceit, that no possible native force of character, and no depth of wealth and originality, can lift a man into absolute independence of his fellowmen, and no generation of men can be independent of the preceding generation.”⁶³ Douglass reconciled the seeming tension between the concept of a self-made man and a social, political man with his view that man could best make himself when he learned from those who preceded him. Likewise, he needed to live in a regime in which his rights were protected so he could freely apply himself to the pursuit of knowledge.

Douglass’s point that a self-made man was not born into a lofty position certainly resonated with his audience. While he emphasized that human greatness had been an inheritance, the self-made man’s efforts are laudable because he was not given what he had:

⁶⁰ Douglass, “Self-Made Men,” 548.

⁶¹ Blight, *Prophet of Freedom*, 566.

⁶² Nick Bromell, *The Powers of Dignity: The Black Political Philosophy of Frederick Douglass* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2021), 135.

⁶³ Douglass, “Self-Made Men,” 549.

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“They are the men who owe little or nothing to birth, relationship, friendly surroundings; to wealth inherited or to early approved means of education; who are what they are, without the aid of any favoring conditions by which other men usually rise in the world and achieve great results.”⁶⁴ These individuals pushed through adversity in order to become men of good character and social standing. They did not necessarily have the greatest intellectual capacity by nature. As Douglass explained, there were a number of people born into a lowly station who had some capacity of genius, but this did not guarantee the advancement attained by the self-made man. “Much can certainly be said of superior mental endowments, and I should on some accounts, lean strongly to that theory,” he argued, “but for numerous examples which seem, and do, contradict it, and for the depressing tendency such a theory must have on humanity generally.”⁶⁵ He wanted people with superior natural faculties to flourish, but he thought emphasis ought not to be placed too heavily on natural mental endowments. The concept of the self-made man countered claims that one could only be successful if he were uniquely gifted, and this was in line with his advocacy for industrial education in the 1850s.

According to Douglass, the character of the self-made man is of greater importance than his natural intellectual endowments. Douglass thought a man of average faculties could attain the knowledge that would enable him to live a meaningful life. The self-made man used his capacity to reason for his own improvement to overcome adversity. Peter Myers explains, “He held self-making to be at once the basis of natural rights, a right itself, and a duty.”⁶⁶ As Myers makes clear, Douglass’s view of self-making is that it was a right that society needed to respect, and it was a duty that the individual needed to perform. Douglass did not want his audience to believe that fortune alone determined one’s lot in life. He did not want the drumbeat of whites telling blacks they were not capable of bearing the rights and privileges of equal citizenship to take such hold that they would withdraw and resign themselves. The self-made man did not want to live like a slave, and Douglass thought no one should submit to such an existence. He argued that an ordinary person and not just one with superior natural talents can choose to help himself: “From these remarks it will be evident that, allowing only ordinary ability and opportunity, we may explain success mainly by one word

⁶⁴ Douglass, “Self-Made Men,” 550.

⁶⁵ Douglass, “Self-Made Men,” 552.

⁶⁶ Myers, *Race and the Rebirth*, 114.

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and that word is WORK! WORK!! WORK!!! WORK!!!!”⁶⁷ This continuous effort, Douglass thought, was the key to black people making the best of their circumstances and improving opportunities available to their posterity. He tried to encourage blacks to see that a better life was possible for them even when they felt overwhelmed by the adverse circumstances they faced. This work would not be completed quickly: “Not transient and fitful effort, but patient, enduring, honest, unremitting and indefatigable work into which the whole heart is put, and which, in both temporal and spiritual affairs, is the true miracle worker. Everyone may avail himself of this marvelous power, if he will.”⁶⁸ Douglass made clear that the life of a self-made man was difficult but rewarding. It was not relegated to those who were favored by fortune. It took a strong will to overcome the adverse position into which one was born.

Douglass returned to his point on how man is connected to his fellow man in this exhortation for work. If black people in a low position wanted the assistance of the then-dominant whites, they would need to show a willingness to help themselves. They could not wait for whites to give the platform from which they could more easily reach new heights. “If he waits for this, he may wait long,” Douglass declared, “and perhaps forever. He who does not think himself worth saving from poverty and ignorance by his own efforts, will hardly be thought worth the efforts of anybody else.”⁶⁹ Freedom, said Douglass, was not something to be simply given; it had to be earned to be made durable. Black people would be subservient in a new way if they deferred to whites instead of laboring themselves. Buccola describes how Douglass believed respect could be earned: “With strong hands *and* strong minds, Douglass thought, individuals are best equipped to operate in the world. In addition to equipping men to compete in the marketplace, the development of the mind, he believed, is a crucial part of the task of demonstrating that one is worthy of concern and respect.”⁷⁰ Douglass envisioned a black populace that believed in their own capacity for self-improvement and reformulated society’s conception of their capabilities in the process.

Douglass emphasized how consistent work for oneself is indispensable, and he exhorted American society to assess the progress of black people in light of the lower starting point from which they came. He wanted blacks to be given “fair play,” a phrase he used in the

⁶⁷ Douglass, “Self-Made Men,” 556.

⁶⁸ Douglass, “Self-Made Men,” 556.

⁶⁹ Douglass, “Self-Made Men,” 556.

⁷⁰ Buccola, *The Political Thought of Frederick Douglass*, 151.

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letter to Stowe as well as this speech. “For any adjustment of the seals of comparison,” he explained, “fair play demands that to the barbarism from which the negro started shall be added two hundred years heavy with human bondage.”⁷¹ This is not to say that Douglass thought black people in America should always be treated differently because they had been enslaved. The best solution society could give would be to open up opportunities for the sort of men he described throughout the speech: “The nearest approach to justice to the negro for the past is to do him justice in the present. Throw open to him the doors of the schools, the factories, the workshops, and of all mechanical industries.”⁷² These are types of knowledge that Douglass believed could permit a dignified existence in a free society. Myers concludes, “In demanding fair play, Douglass insisted on the duties of both parties.”⁷³ In other words, Douglass thought both races had important roles to play in the elevation of blacks in America to a more equal station.

Douglass did not ask America to simply give blacks a better position in society. Rather, he wanted them to have greater access to opportunities to improve themselves: “For his own welfare, give him a chance to do whatever he can do well. If he fails then, let him fail! I can, however, assure you that he will not fail.”⁷⁴ It was best for black people to believe they were capable of helping themselves, and Douglass believed they were. He argued they had already demonstrated their capacities to be industrious and acquisitive, but they could do even better if they had access to equal resources. Douglass declared of the black man, “In a thousand instances has he verified my theory of self-made men. He well performed the task of making bricks without straw: now give him straw. Give him all the facilities for honest and successful livelihood, and in all honorable avocations receive him as a man among men.”⁷⁵ Douglass thought more blacks could live in a dignified way if their desire to work and cultivate skills was further encouraged instead of hampered by white society.

While emphatically arguing that a hearty work ethic was praiseworthy, Douglass did note that there were some elites who would look at the self-made man with contempt. These elites viewed someone who had gone to university to read complex books as admirable, while the

⁷¹ Douglass, “Self-Made Men,” 557.

⁷² Douglass, “Self-Made Men,” 557.

⁷³ Myers, *Race and the Rebirth*, 119.

⁷⁴ Douglass, “Self-Made Men,” 557.

⁷⁵ Douglass, “Self-Made Men,” 557.

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self-made man was merely a laborer in comparison. However, Douglass did not think this elitism was the general sentiment of the nation: "There is a small class of very small men who turn their backs upon any one who presumes to be anybody, independent of Harvard, Yale, Princeton or other similar institutions of learning. These individuals cannot believe that any good can come out of Nazareth. With them, the diploma is more than the man."⁷⁶ These men possessed the highest credentials, but Douglass considered them to be of lesser character than the self-made man. Their book learning did not inexorably translate to superior character or productivity. Douglass's reference to Nazareth would not have been lost on his audience: these elites would have doubted that Jesus was the Son of God because Christ came from a small town. Those in the upper echelon of society were so focused on academic credentials that they would deny that the "uneducated" Jesus possessed special knowledge that all people ought to heed. The argument extends from credentials to property: Douglass wanted all white audience members to contemplate how they viewed blacks who were in a lower position. The worth of a human being should not be determined by the prestige of his degree or the size of his estate.

OVERCOMING RACIAL DIVISION THROUGH EDUCATION

"The Blessings of Liberty and Education" was one of Douglass's last great speeches, and it is worthy of thorough examination as the culmination of his work on education. As with the address at the Douglass Institute, the occasion of this speech was the dedication of an industrial school to educate black students.⁷⁷ Douglass addressed the significance of the foundation of this school both in the progress it represented for formerly enslaved blacks and the city in which it was built. He began with a few remarks of personal introduction. This was an effective tool to remind his audience of the depths from which both he and they had come: "Fifty-six years ago to-day, it was my good fortune to cease to be a slave, a chattel personal, and to become a man. It was upon the 3rd day of September, 1838, that I started

⁷⁶ Douglass, "Self-Made Men," 573.

⁷⁷ Rita G. Koman, "Legacy for Learning: Jennie Dean and the Manassas Industrial School," *OAH Magazine of History* 7, no. 4 (Summer 1993): 37. A broad audience of black and white community leaders had come to hear Douglass speak, and the school began operating the following month with a small number of students that quickly grew: "On 1 October 1894, six pupils came to learn. The faculty consisted of a principal and three teachers, all of whom worked only for their board the first year. Within months of its opening, the school population reached seventy-five students."

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upon my little life work in the world.”⁷⁸ Douglass spoke to them in 1894 as the most famous African American orator of his day. He reminded the audience that he had risen out of slavery in order for them to believe that elevation was possible. Blight writes of the formative role of education in Douglass’s life and how he viewed it as a necessity for others: “Douglass had always been driven by the quest for knowledge; nothing had given more meaning to his life than the freedom, self-understanding, and power he had attained through language and learning.”⁷⁹ Education was not granted to Douglass formally, but on his own he found ways to attain it and a life of fulfillment after slavery. The founding of this school would give black students a place to learn that the young enslaved Douglass could only have dreamed of.

The school’s location was of note given Douglass’s reference back to his time under slavery. Manassas was one of the most famous battle sites in the Civil War. Virginia was a slave state and the governing seat of the Confederacy. It was now home to a school for black students. “Since the great and terrible battle with which its name is associated and which has now passed into history as the birth of many battles,” Douglass declared, “no event has occurred here so important in its character and influence and so every way significant, as the event which we have this day met to inaugurate and celebrate.”⁸⁰ This language may seem to be somewhat hyperbolic regarding the founding of one school, but Douglass thought this occasion was emblematic of a greater development for blacks generally. “This spot, once the scene of fratricidal war, and the witness of its innumerable and indescribable horrors, is, we hope to be hereafter the scene of brotherly kindness, charity and peace.”⁸¹ The occasion contrasted starkly with the earlier conditions blacks had faced in this same location: “It is to be the place where the children of a once enslaved people may realize the blessings of liberty and education, and learn how to make for themselves and for all others the best of both worlds.”⁸² Emancipation from enslavement attained in the war was the first step for blacks to be able to pursue the education required for true freedom, as Douglass understood the term.

The transition from slavery to liberty was happening relatively quickly, Douglass argued. While it was easy to dwell on the injustices present at the time, Douglass wanted to remind

⁷⁸ Douglass “The Blessings of Liberty and Education: An Address Delivered in Manassas, Virginia, on 3 September 1894,” *The Frederick Douglass Papers, Series One*, 5:617.

⁷⁹ Blight, *Frederick Douglass’ Civil War*, 198.

⁸⁰ Douglass, “The Blessings of Liberty and Education,” 617.

⁸¹ Douglass, “The Blessings of Liberty and Education,” 617.

⁸² Douglass, “The Blessings of Liberty and Education,” 617-18.

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his audience of the seismic shift in circumstances that this school represented. He rhetorically asked, "Who would have imagined that Virginia would, after the agony of war, in a time so short, would become so enlightened and so liberal as to be willing and even pleased to welcome here, upon her sacred soil, a school of the children of her former slaves?"⁸³ Douglass emphasized that this change had occurred over the span of approximately thirty years, which is a comparatively short time when considering the long duration of the institution of slavery.⁸⁴ Douglass's optimism about the improving status of black Americans is supported by the decline of illiteracy as the twentieth century approached: "By 1900, overall Black illiteracy had decreased to 48%, with the younger generations showing much higher literacy levels than older generations: 85% of Blacks ages 60 to 69 were illiterate, whereas 37% of Blacks ages 20 to 29 were illiterate."⁸⁵ Those who fell between ages 20 to 29 "were the first cohort born after Emancipation."⁸⁶ The change that Douglass speaks of occurred both in the South and the North, and he believed it ought to provide African Americans with a greater sense of hope. The people of Virginia had "encouraged and justified the founding of this Industrial School," while "the good people of the North have responded to the call for pecuniary aid and thus made this enterprise successful."⁸⁷ Whites in both regions wanted to help blacks access opportunities to develop their talents.

Douglass then referred to his support for industrial education decades prior to the foundation of this school. "Nearly forty years ago I was its advocate," he explained, "and at that time I held it to be the chief want of the free colored people of the North.... I saw even then, that the free negro of the North, with every thing great expected of him, but with no means at hand to meet such expectations, could not hope to rise while he was excluded from all profitable employments."⁸⁸ Douglass contended that while a black man was not a slave by law, he was not truly free because he did not have equality of opportunity. There were free blacks before the war, but most did not have the training and employment he believed were

⁸³ Douglass, "The Blessings of Liberty and Education," 618.

⁸⁴ Du Bois, "The Talented Tenth," *Du Bois: Writings*, 848, provides a chart of the number of black college graduates that shows a steady increase of black graduates following Reconstruction. Before 1876, there were 137 who graduated from black colleges and 75 from white colleges. In 1895-1899 there were 475 black graduates from black colleges and 88 from white colleges.

⁸⁵ Cohen, White, and Cohen, "Mind the Gap," 125.

⁸⁶ Cohen, White, and Cohen, "Mind the Gap," 125.

⁸⁷ Douglass, "The Blessings of Liberty and Education," 5:618.

⁸⁸ Douglass, "The Blessings of Liberty and Education," 5:619.

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necessary for one to live as a self-governing citizen. “He was free by law,” Douglass said, “but denied the chief advantages of freedom: he was indeed but nominally free; he was not compelled to call any man his master, and no one could call him slave, but he was still in fact a slave, a slave to society and could only be a hewer of wood and a drawer of water.”⁸⁹ Freedom, he thought, included the potential for mobility in society. Myers concludes, “What was needed to secure the conditions of real freedom for African Americans after emancipation was a program of liberal reforms centering on the protection of formal civil and political rights (foremost among them the right to vote), including the provision of fair opportunities for acquiring property and education.”⁹⁰ The school Douglass depicted in this speech would be a refuge for blacks to learn how to best apply their skills to live as rights-bearing, property-holding citizens. It would offer an education that would comprehensively affect its students. “It is to educate the hand as well as the brain; to teach men to work as well as to think, and to think as well as to work. It is to teach them to join thought to work, and thus to get the very best result of thought and work.”⁹¹ This is an expansion of Douglass’s earlier advocacy for industrial training and the self-made man, which focused on developing skills to become more independent. With changing circumstances, Douglass added a broader formal education for blacks who would have more opportunities than in the past.

The beginning of Douglass’s speech focused on man’s unique rational capacity that permits him to be capable of doing great things, and he returns to this point after describing the sort of education the school would offer. This capacity needed to be cultivated: “In his natural condition, however, man is only potentially great. As a mere physical being he does not take high rank, even among the beasts of the field.... His true dignity is not to be sought in his arms or in his legs, but in his head.”⁹² Man is not naturally physically stronger than many animals. His potential to be great lies within the capacities of his mind, not merely the training of the body. “But if man is without education,” Douglass elaborated, “although with all his latent possibilities attaching to him, he is, as I said, but a pitiable object; a giant in body, but a pigmy in intellect, and at best but half a man.”⁹³ Douglass had witnessed such men

⁸⁹ Douglass, “The Blessings of Liberty and Education,” 619.

⁹⁰ Myers, *Race and the Rebirth*, 148.

⁹¹ Douglass, “The Blessings of Liberty and Education,” 621.

⁹² Douglass, “The Blessings of Liberty and Education,” 622.

⁹³ Douglass, “The Blessings of Liberty and Education,” 623.

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whose intellectual capacities lay dormant under slavery. Both slave master and slave were educated in the ways of the institution instead of the free inquiry natural to human beings.

Emancipation from bondage was only the starting point for freedom. Douglass wanted whites to see the potential for free blacks in society and for them to see themselves as having a role to play in improving their country. Education in a free society was the best way for whites to perceive blacks as more than servile menial laborers. It was a necessary public good that American society needed to support. Concurrently, Douglass wanted black people to develop a work ethic that would be applied to bettering both their material and intellectual conditions. In one of the speech's most enduring passages, Douglass contrasted ignorance and servility with education and freedom: "Education, on the other hand, means emancipation. It means light and liberty. It means the uplifting of the soul of man into the glorious light of truth, the light by which men can only be made free. To deny education to any people is one of the greatest crimes against human nature."⁹⁴ Douglass thought the human being was at his most complete in the pursuit of knowledge. The refusal to permit blacks, or even poor whites, the means to acquire an education is to prevent them from attaining their full potential as human beings. Buccola treats the implications of Douglass's grand proclamation: "In this statement, we see Douglass articulate his belief that knowledge, freedom, and moral truth are closely related to one another. Because education serves both freedom and virtue, it is not surprising that Douglass was so deeply devoted to the idea that all individuals must be educated."⁹⁵ He thought education was possible in a free society and necessary for its perpetuation. It was good for the individual, and it was indispensable for human beings to live together, particularly in his vision of a multiethnic American society.

Blacks had been told that they were ineducable by racist whites, but Douglass thought the influence of this prejudice was waning. Americans would be willing to help blacks acquire the means to help themselves when they were shown why it benefited them. Douglass had to appeal to the interest of whites in order to sway them. He again points out that education has been withheld from blacks for a long time: Physical wrongs were "terrible enough; but deeper down and more terrible still were the mental and moral wrongs which enter into his claim for a slight measure of compensation. For two hundred and forty years the light of

⁹⁴ Douglass, "The Blessings of Liberty and Education," 623.

⁹⁵ Buccola, *The Political Thought of Frederick Douglass*, 153.

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letters was denied him, and the gates of knowledge were closed against him.”⁹⁶ The best way for black people to overcome the lingering effects of slavery was education. The state of ignorance imposed by slavery had crippled their advancement. This was, writes Buccola, a truly liberal education: “In Douglass’s mind, education was linked to freedom and virtue. In order to achieve freedom, individuals must acquire the intellectual and practical skills provided by a liberal education. In order to develop the moral and civic virtues that are supportive of freedom, individuals must be liberated from the vices of ignorance.”⁹⁷ In Douglass’s view, education enables a person to live as a free citizen. His educational program appeared to be relatively remedial when he talked about trades in the past, but his end goal was no less than shaping human beings to be moral and industrious.⁹⁸

While the speech is most applicable to the plight of black people in the aftermath of slavery, Douglass thought his work was in service of making America a better country for everyone. He did not want racial division to remain a source of perpetual conflict. In fact, he thought that one’s identity as a human being was more vital than his race. He explained, “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. In the essential dignity of man as man, I find all necessary incentives and aspirations to a useful and noble life.”⁹⁹ The human race is universal. The education Douglass advocated was an intrinsic good for all people. His appeal to the human being over ethnic identity was in response to African American leaders who assessed others as being a “race man” or not. Douglass concluded that the essence of a human being is not to be found in a particular race: “Neither law, learning, nor religion, is addressed to any man’s color or race. Science, education, the word of God, and all the virtues known among men, are recommended to us not as races but as men. We are not recommended to love or hate any particular variety of the human family more than any other.”¹⁰⁰ The race men who thought they were advocates for the best interests of blacks were perpetuating a prejudice of a different sort. Douglass did not question their motives, but he thought their method was fundamentally flawed. He argued, “My position is, that it is better

⁹⁶ Douglass, “The Blessings of Liberty and Education,” 623.

⁹⁷ Buccola, *The Political Thought of Frederick Douglass*, 157.

⁹⁸ See Buccola, *The Political Thought of Frederick Douglass*, 153.

⁹⁹ Douglass, “The Blessings of Liberty and Education,” 625.

¹⁰⁰ Douglass, “The Blessings of Liberty and Education,” 625.

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to regard ourselves as a part of the whole than as the whole of a part. It is better to be a member of the great human family, than a member of particular variety of the human family. In regard to men as in regard to things, the whole is more than a part.”¹⁰¹ The expositors of race pride focused on themselves as a minority group to the detriment of the race they believed they were helping. Myers argues that there were times in which Douglass was a kind of “race man” in possessing a certain pride as a black man, but not to the degree Douglass said was problematic: “For Douglass, proper race pride signified a negation of racial shame and inferiority, not an affirmation of the right kind of racial superiority.”¹⁰² Race pride, in the moderate form described by Myers, was the belief that being a member of a particular race should not permit one to view himself as naturally superior or inferior based on his race. This interpretation certainly is applicable to Douglass, but Douglass was not a race man according to the definition of the phrase when he used it himself.

Douglass proceeded to apply a universal feature of human existence to the American context. The struggle for racial equality in America was in accordance with the quest for justice throughout human history. For Douglass, justice was not simply a reparation for ills done to his race in the past. This is clear in his refusal to align only with members of a race. Instead, he would join with whomever he thought was pursuing the right ends: “I put my foot upon the effort to draw lines between the white and the black or between blacks and so-called Afro-Americans, or race line in the domain of liberty. Whoever is for equal rights, for equal education, for equal opportunities, for all men of whatever race or color, I hail him as a ‘countryman, clansman, kinsman and brother beloved.’”¹⁰³ He believed that to be truly human was to live as a free person within a free society. Black people had long had this freedom withheld from them, but circumstances were changing at a relatively rapid pace. This school at Manassas reflected the greater assimilation between the races, which Douglass thought was both just and inevitable.

The hurdles black people experienced at this point were, in part, a response to their advancement by whites who preferred they remain in a lowly position. Douglass claimed that the whites would not care if blacks had remained in the servile position they had been in

¹⁰¹ Douglass, “The Blessings of Liberty and Education,” 627.

¹⁰² Myers, *Race and the Rebirth*, 172.

¹⁰³ Douglass, “The Blessings of Liberty and Education,” 627.

during slavery: “It is only when he acquires education, property, popularity and influence; only when he attempts to rise above his ancient level, where he was numbered with the beasts of the field, and aspires to be a man and a man among men, that he invites repression.”¹⁰⁴ The black man had proven himself desirous of the life of a human being. In response to this, the white man sought to reassert his dominance as it existed in the hierarchy of slavery. Douglass thought this tendency would be best overcome when whites saw an educated, civilized black man as representative of the qualities inherent in human beings. Slavery had separated people into two distinct races, with one being master and the other slave. Organizing men into a majority and minority race perpetuated artificial hierarchy and prejudice. Instead, one needed to consider the character and merit of his fellow man rather than his race. Since race was not the defining characteristic of human beings, Douglass wanted members of both races to view themselves as Americans. They should make an effort to view Americans of the other race as engaged in a common political enterprise. The position of one as a human being and an American citizen could be far broader than race, and it would permit more people to live in accordance with the higher elements of their nature. Bill E. Lawson observes, “An important aspect of Douglass’s vision for African-American social progress was his belief that, at some point in time, racial differences would not matter in the lives of the majority of Americans, black or white.”¹⁰⁵ America, Douglass believed, was not a regime founded to only incorporate white people. Black people had an equally rightful claim to live as citizens. Myers describes Douglass’s view of integration: “This was the cause he embraced as his own, laboring to advance it with single mind, whole heart, and energy second to none among his own contemporaries from the beginning to the end of his six-decade career of public activism.”¹⁰⁶ Douglass wanted members of both races to think of themselves as Americans first. The appeal to one’s status as an American did not negate the past injustices directed toward black Americans, but Douglass thought it was best to place national identity above ethnic origin for American citizens to live together in concord.

¹⁰⁴ Douglass, “The Blessings of Liberty and Education,” 628.

¹⁰⁵ Bill E. Lawson, “Frederick Douglass and Social Progress,” in *Frederick Douglass: A Critical Reader*, ed. Bill E. Lawson and Frank M. Kirkland (Malden: Blackwell Publishers, 1999), 366.

¹⁰⁶ Peter C. Myers, “‘A School of the Moral Education of the Nation’: Frederick Douglass on the Meaning of the Civil War,” in *The Political Thought of the Civil War*, ed. Alan Levine, Thomas W. Merrill, and James R. Stoner, Jr. (Lawrence, KS: University Press of Kansas, 2018), 370.

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“The Blessings of Liberty and Education” represents the culmination of Douglass’s educational philosophy, and the content of this speech is best understood in the context of his work on education in the preceding years. Education for black Americans was part of his goal to shape an America in which blacks and whites would be able to live as citizens in a shared country. Citizenship should not depend upon one’s race because the qualities of human beings transcend race. As Douglass said in “Blessings,” “Manhood is broad enough, and high enough as a platform for you and me and all of us. The colored people of this country should advance to the high position of the Constitution of the country. It makes no distinction on account of race or color, and they should make none.”¹⁰⁷ He wanted all Americans to live a life befitting their rational nature and moral capacity. This would be possible when they received a comprehensive education. Manhood was greater than race, and he wanted society to move away from the particulars of race that had sown division to instead focus on the qualities inherent in human beings. The Constitution was made for a people whose potential could only be fully realized within a political society in which rights and privileges were granted equally to all citizens. Douglass provided the model for an education in which black Americans specifically could improve their material circumstances and cultivate their talents in the aftermath of slavery to be able to live as fulfilled human beings and citizens.

¹⁰⁷ Douglass, “The Blessings of Liberty and Education,” 625.