

Bernard K. Duffy
and Richard D. Besel

Dr. Bernard K. Duffy is a Professor of Rhetoric and **Dr. Richard D. Besel** is an Assistant Professor of Rhetoric. Both are in the Communications Studies Department at California Polytechnic State University.

Recollection, Regret, and Foreboding in Frederick Douglass's Fourth of July Orations of 1852 and 1875

Nineteenth century America Independence Day orations were as much a part of the celebration as festoons, flags, fireworks, cannonades, parades and pealing bells (Travers 54; Engels 311-12). Every city sought an orator to perform a skillfully crafted reaffirmation of the principles for which Americans had risked their lives. Most prized undoubtedly were those who simultaneously were civic leaders, public philosophers, and wordsmiths—important people who possessed both moral authority and the literary and oral ability needed to impress and inspire their audiences. Silver-tongued Senators Daniel Webster and Edward Everett were obvious choices. Lincoln as president delivered an Independence Day oration, as did national anthem author Francis Scott Key, humorist Mark Twain, and abolitionist William Lloyd Garrison (Heintze). In all, 2500 printed Independence Day orations survive from those delivered in nineteenth century America, the bulk by orators less celebrated than these, but never by ordinary citizens (Martin, “The Fourth,” 397; Travers 6). Without exception invited speakers treated their compositions seriously, laboring over them for weeks, if not months, in advance (Banninga 45-46; Martin, “The Fourth,” 393). Significant speeches were printed and circulated, often in pamphlet form, sometimes stimulating the publication of pamphlets written in response (Martin, “The Fourth,” 397; Goetsch and Hurm). The fact that most important speeches were destined for print helps to explain the

atavistic grandiloquent style of nineteenth century oral discourse, particularly of ceremonial speeches.

Abolition orators used the July Fourth oration to plead their cause. Frederick Douglass, unquestionably the greatest abolition orator, delivered several such orations, the most famous of which is “What to the Slave is the Fourth of July,” delivered in Rochester, New York, on July 5, 1852. The speech ranks as one of the most important abolition speeches of the nineteenth century and Douglass’s most celebrated oratorical achievement. Douglass’s use of irony in this speech has captured the attention of many rhetorical scholars (Lucaites; Fulkerson; Terrill). Less well known, yet still important, is Douglass’s 1875 speech “The Color Question.” Delivered in Hillsdale, just outside of Washington, D.C., also on July 5, this address provides an important comparison point for understanding the development of Douglass’s rhetoric. Unlike in previous analyses, Douglass’s penchant for irony is not the singular focus of this essay. Instead, we argue that the use of *anamnesis*, often understood to mean “recollection” or an attempt to remind people of what they have forgotten, saturates both of his speeches (Allen; Scott). Following his break with the Garrisonians, Douglass used a specific recollection of the Declaration of Independence to create a mythic vision of what America could and should become.

Rhetorical and Historical Context

William Garrison’s Fourth of July oration, “Address to the Colonization Society,” delivered at Park Street Church in Boston on 1829, was the first major speech of the man who would become Douglass’s mentor and helped establish a subgenre of Fourth of July orations delivered by abolitionists (Rohler 184-185). Garrison exploited, although to a much lesser extent than Douglass would, the great paradox of celebrating liberty within the context of slavery in the United States. Slavery was to Garrison, “a gangrene preying upon our vitals [which] . . .

should make this a day of fasting and prayer, not of boisterous merriment and idle pageantry—a day of great lamentations, nor of congratulatory joy.” Although his speech violates the expectation that speakers praise the Constitution and the government it established, Garrison’s speech embodied the revolutionary spirit also valued in speeches within this genre (Martin, “The Mind,” 395). Fourth of July speeches such as Garrison’s and Douglass’s boldly took issue with the fulfillment of the ideals of the Founding Fathers, if not with the ideals themselves.

There was not a more famous or more eloquent African American abolitionist than Frederick Douglass. Born a slave, the unacknowledged son of an unknown white father and an African American mother in Maryland, Douglass found his voice as an abolitionist and advocate of the equal rights of African Americans in Baltimore. He listened to and participated in debates among free Blacks in the city, becoming a member of the East Baltimore Mental Improvement Society. At the age of twelve he had read Caleb Bingham’s *The Columbian Orator*, a collection of patriotic works including essays and dialogues, used in school rooms early in the nineteenth century to develop literacy and an appreciation of eloquence and the importance of public discourse in a free republic. Bingham, whose book had a profound impact on Douglass, preached the importance of combining eloquence with content that merited such eloquence, e.g., the ideas of liberty and equality (Lampe 9-13; Martin, “The Mind,” 139-40). As an abolitionist orator, Douglass initially aligned himself with the radical views of Garrison, who claimed that the U.S. Constitution immorally supported slavery and that slaves should be immediately emancipated (McClure 428-29). Garrison ultimately came to believe that the only solution was disunion and secession (Lucaites 55). The Garrisonians made significant inroads in persuading the American public of the immorality of slavery, but Douglass broke with the Garrisonians in 1847, only

briefly continuing to support their view of the Constitution. By 1850 Douglass thought differently, preferring to see the Constitution as embodying tenets of equality that, if properly interpreted, would lead Americans to abandon slavery (McClure 428-29).

As an orator, Douglass quickly became a celebrity. The Massachusetts Anti-Slavery Society hired him as a paid lecturer, a position he held from 1841 to 1845. Among the African American speakers who satisfied the public interest in the life of the slave, the uncommonly literate and eloquent Douglass rose to stardom. So literate was Douglass that rumors circulated he was an imposter; such an educated speaker could not be a fugitive slave. To establish his *bona fides*, he published *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass* in 1845. As his fame increased, so did the danger that bounty hunters would seize him and return him to slavery, however, and so Douglass sailed to Britain and, until 1847, lectured across the British Isles. He returned to the United States after reluctantly allowing British supporters to purchase his freedom so that he could continue his abolition work in America itself. A career as an editor and journalist followed in publications such as *North Star*, *Frederick Douglass's Paper*, *Douglass Monthly* and *New National Era* (Martin, "The Mind," 140-42; Fulkerson 82-83). Douglass availed himself of every opportunity to remind audiences of problems many of his contemporaries wanted to sublimate.

Fourth of July orations provided a great opportunity for shaping historical memory, for active "recollection," and even the creation of myth, as Douglass later realized in witnessing how white civic leaders chose to remember the Civil War. Many layers of speeches delivered at commemorative ceremonies—whether praising the Founding Fathers, the Army of the Potomac, or the Union Army—created a collective national consciousness through a process of steady inculcation. Conservative rhetorical critic Richard Weaver claims that grandiloquent speeches of the nineteenth century reminded

their audiences of received truth, of a "*textus receptus*," in a day when there was greater homogeneity of cultural belief (Weaver, "Spaciousness," 171). Therefore, audiences judged ceremonial speeches not by the originality of their claims, but by how artfully accepted truths were represented. Fourth of July orations deepened preexisting belief and provided instruction in public virtue for the young (Duffy). In such speeches, history was to be experienced with sentiment rather than remembered objectively in its factual details, as "felt" rather than "passive" history. (Blight, "What Will Peace," 212). Weaver argues that the modern decline in the importance of rhetoric is commensurate with the decline in the importance of socially cohesive memories ("Visions" 55-56).

From one point of view, then, nineteenth century American orators, recalling the virtuous words and deeds of past generations, created "a meditative relationship with history" wherein audiences with shared beliefs about religion, morality, and government remembered the past in light of those beliefs (Weaver, "Spaciousness," 178). Recollection, "an act of gathering things together again," inspired by ceremonial discourse, is typically regarded as a force for conservatism, although, as Blight also notes, reformers such as Douglass strove to modify perceptions about the past to stimulate change ("What Will Peace," 218).

The appraisal of nineteenth century sentimental oratory characterized by Fourth of July orations depends upon one's stance on the value of conservatism and of reform. Liberal rhetorical critic Edwin Black believes that the common run of nineteenth century sentimental oratory operated through "willful distraction," wherein audiences were encouraged to repress recognition of social problems, most notably slavery. Sentimental orators, Black argues, directed the emotions of their audiences, leaving no room for individual response (100-104). In his historical study of Fourth of July Celebrations, Len Travers suggests that "the ritualized celebrations of the Fourth of July helped

to mask disturbing ambiguities and contradictions in the new republic, overlaying real social and political conflict with a conceptual veneer of shared ideology and elemental harmony.” Thus, while political partisans used Independence Day as a vehicle to air their disputes, “other Americans employed the rituals, rhetoric, and symbolism of Independence Day to minimize the conflicts and to assert the idealized (but dubious) unity of the American people” (Travers 7). Blight provides an important example, addressed later in this article, that the “causes and consequences of the Civil War—the role of slavery and the challenge of racial equality,” were “actively suppressed,” as Douglass feared they would be in his Fourth of July oration of 1875 (“What Will Peace” 214).

Douglass’s 1852 Address

Douglass delivered “What to the American Slave is the 4th of July?” as part of an 1852 Independence Day Celebration at Corinthian Hall in Rochester, New York, the city where he had taken up residence after his return from Britain. The Rochester Ladies’ Anti-Slavery Society invited Douglass to deliver the main address and Douglass wished to speak on July 5th following a tradition in the New York State African American community. The audience was comprised of six hundred people who had paid the ticket price of twelve and a half cents each, the equivalent of \$3.20 in current dollars (Fulkerson 90-91; Blight, “What to the Slave”). Since many in Douglass’s mostly white, immediate audience were abolitionists such as himself, in large measure he was “preaching to the choir.” Among Garrisonian abolitionists, though, his anti-slavery interpretation of the Constitution would have been controversial. Before Douglass took the podium to address his audience, a clergyman first read the Declaration of Independence (Blight, “What to the Slave”). Douglass’s speech, subdued and circumspect at the outset, abruptly turns to mordant criticism of the Nation and, apparently, of his audience: “America is false to the past, false to the pres-

ent, and solemnly binds herself to be false to the future. . . . I will not equivocate; I will not excuse.”

As the speech unfolds, Douglass deliberately violates the norms of the occasion, but it is difficult to believe that his inviters might not have expected as much from the fiery thirty-four year old abolitionist. Surely, the immediate audience would have recognized the rhetorical artifice in his acutely uncomfortable question: “Do you mean, citizens, to mock me, by asking me to speak to-day?” The women abolitionists who invited Douglass would not have been surprised by the tension he deliberately creates between himself and his audience. As the editor of the *Frederick Douglass Papers* remarks, “Sarcasm, invective, and ridicule were constants in Douglass’s orations” (Blassingame xxxiii). Those who knew his reputation as an abolitionist speaker would have been disappointed had his speech lacked the firebrand qualities that had made him a sought-after orator. Douglass’s ironic treatment of his subject might have been a thrillingly provocative oratorical strategy, but it is difficult to believe that an audience of abolitionist sympathizers would have found it personally offensive. The implied audience to whom Douglass directs his criticism served as a foil for his charge of mockery, and a critical component of the rhetorical drama he created.

Customarily, ceremonial (or *epideictic*) speeches take non-controversial themes, the praise or blame of what is acknowledged as praiseworthy or blameworthy. Although belonging to the epideictic genre, this speech does not fulfill the conventional purpose of a Fourth of July address—to praise America and its institutions among Americans. Its praise is reserved for the sacrifices made and the risks taken by the Founders on behalf of liberty, and even that praise serves to heighten Douglass’s argument of blame—that Americans in the present were guilty of the sin of hypocrisy for accepting the institution of slavery in their midst. Douglass, though a free man, assumes the position of a representative of African Americans callously

enslaved in a nation dedicated to liberty and of free, Northern African Americans accorded, at best, second class citizenship. If indeed Douglass were only speaking on behalf of abolition, the irony of the speech would be less meaningful. Although Douglass appears to criticize his immediate audience, the people he wishes to make most uncomfortable with his criticisms are the larger audience that would read his carefully burnished speech in print. He reveals as much in saying midway through the speech: "O! had I the ability and could I reach the nation's ear." A journalist, Douglass well understood both the power of the printed word and the power of committing an act of oratorical defiance that would make his speech newsworthy. Northern journalists were known to describe Douglass in terms ranging from "'saucy negro,' 'the impudent negro,' 'an impertinent black vagabond,' [to] 'that black disgrace to human nature'" (Blassingame xxxviii).

The main body of the speech is divided into two broad sections, the first praising the Founders, and the second criticizing the present generation for not acting in the same spirit of liberty as their forebears. Douglass begins by lowering expectations about his speech, a nineteenth century rhetorical custom he regularly followed: "I evince no elaborate preparation nor grace my speech with a high sounding exordium. With little experience and less learning, I have been able to throw my thoughts hastily and imperfectly together" (Blassingame xxxvii). In reality, Douglass had departed from his normal practice of extemporaneous and impromptu speaking and had spent fully three weeks preparing the speech (Chesebrough 45). Despite Douglass's claims to the contrary, the *exordium*, or introduction, that follows *is* distinctly "high-sounding" and replete with carefully contemplated, if not sometimes labored, metaphors. He speaks of the Nation as a "great stream," that might "rise in quiet and stately majesty and inundate the land, refreshing and fertilizing the earth with their mysterious properties," but warns that they might "rise in wrath

and fury" or that the "river may dry up, and leave nothing behind but a withered branch, and the unsightly rock, to howl in the abyss-sweeping wind, the sad tale of departed glory. As with rivers so with nations." Although easy to overlook as a rhetorical embellishment, this carefully constructed metaphor contains the central idea of the speech. Douglass saw that to live, the Nation must continue to renew itself from the same sources that had created it—the idea of equality in the Declaration of Independence and the idea of liberty in the Constitution. Douglass's hydrological metaphor sounds the same chords as "a Nation conceived in Liberty," tested by the Civil War (the "wrath and fury in Douglass' metaphor) and destined for "a new birth of freedom" that Lincoln would memorably envision eleven years later in the Gettysburg Address (cf. Jasinski 80-82).

In narrating the Nation's birth, Douglass celebrates the deeds of *your* fathers, not *his*. With each successive use of "you" and "your," Douglass coils the spring of an invective that is released in the major portion of the speech focused upon the present and the future. He tendentiously describes the circumstances that led to the Nation's foundation based upon the principle of liberty: "Oppression makes a wise man mad. Your fathers were wise men, and if they did not go mad, they became restive under this treatment." After many paragraphs in which Douglass distances himself from his audience by referring repeatedly to "your fathers," he breaks the tension of this deliberate alienation from the audience: "Fellow citizens, I am not wanting in respect for the fathers of this republic. . . . The point from which I am compelled to view them is not certainly, the most favorable; and yet I cannot contemplate their great deeds with less than admiration. . . . I will unite with you to honor their memory." While Douglass cannot but admire the impulses toward liberty of the Founding Fathers, he reminds his audience that as a former slave and disenfranchised citizen, his perspective is at a great remove from theirs, and that his admiration is less filial than intel-

lectual. The “causes of this anniversary,” is a branch of knowledge in which you feel “a much deeper interest than your speaker.” Douglass has only half-fulfilled the purposes of a Fourth of July speech, which was in the nineteenth century a most important ritual in American patriotism. His narrative meets out praise, but is underlain by a grim and glowering detachment from the object of praise.

Douglass’s caveats and self-conscious, ironic positioning in the historical section of the speech prepare the ground for his discussion of the present problem. “My business” he says, “if I have any here to-day, is with the present.” Circumspect historical narrative and personal distancing give way to imperatives, exhortations, and embarrassing questions: “You have no right to wear out and waste the hard-earned fame of your fathers to cover your indolence,” thunders Douglass. “What have I, or those I represent, to do with your national independence?” He presses the irony of his being asked to speak when he is “not included within the pale of this glorious anniversary”: “You may rejoice, I must mourn.” Douglass invokes the image of his former bondage to press the irony of his delivering a speech celebrating independence: “To drag a man in fetters into the grand illuminated temple of liberty, and call upon him to join you in joyous anthems, were inhuman mockery and sacrilegious irony. Do you mean, citizens, to mock me, asking me to speak today?” Douglass’s question and the metaphor of the manacled African American in the “temple of liberty” might seem melodramatic and unwarranted. There is a double irony here since Douglass was not then a slave, nor was he being physically forced, as a slave might be, to speak that day. Yet, like all African Americans who lived in the United States in 1852, including those, such as himself, who were nominally free, Douglass was fettered by discriminatory practices of the North reflecting the same racial prejudice that made slavery possible. Even many abolitionists, although opposed to slavery, supported such discrimination. As John Lucaites

observes: “Douglass came to recognize the latent, if well-intentioned, racist paternalism that underscored the efforts of many white abolitionists like Garrison. He thus came relatively quickly to the conclusion that the social and political implications of such racism were even more significant than the problem of slavery, for they pervaded not only the plantation, but the world of the free black as well” (Lucaites 55-56). Douglass would again revisit the realities of Northern discrimination and Black consciousness in his 1875 Fourth of July address.

In his 1852 address, irony is not merely a stylistic device; it also is a strategic response, a refrain that thunders from deep within the speech. “At a time like this, scorching irony, not convincing argument, is needed. O! had I the ability and could I reach the Nation’s ear, I would to-day, pour out a fiery stream of biting ridicule, blasting reproach, withering sarcasm, and stern rebuke.” Although coyly denying his broader influence, he uses the interest of reaching a much larger audience to justify his use of “scorching irony.” In this section, Douglass employs the rhetorical trope of *paralipsis*, arguing points that he claims are so obvious that they do not require argument—that the slave is a man, that slavery is wrong. He reasons, for example, that if slaves are not men, there would not be laws in the South forbidding their education. Seeking to prove undeniably the wrongfulness of slavery, he presents a litany of specific wrongs that slavery produced, among which are: “to make men brutes, to rob them of their liberty, to work them without wages. . .to beat them with sticks, to flay their flesh with the lash, to load their limbs with irons, to hunt them with dogs, to sell them at auction, [and] to sunder their families.” Douglass’s self-evident indictments against Southern slave culture would today come under the heading of “crimes against humanity,” although then many Southerners callously questioned the very humanity of Black slaves.

Another aspect of the present is the internal slave trade, which Douglass describes in

haunting detail. He contrasts the “mandrover,” the “inhuman wretch who drives” the pitiable “sad procession” of shackled slaves to the Baltimore Pier to sail to the New Orleans slave market and ultimately to the cotton fields and sugar mills of the Deep South. As if describing a tableau that he creates with image-laden language, Douglass moves from one detail of the tableau to the next: “There, see the old man with locks thinned and gray. Cast one glance if you please, upon the young mother, whose shoulders are bare to the scorching sun, her briny tears falling on the brow the babe in her arms.” The appeals are auditory as well as visual; Douglass describes the “chain rattles” and the crack of the slave whip, the anguished scream of a young woman flayed (see also Terrill 224-25).

Douglass maintains that the Fugitive Slave Law essentially nationalized slavery. The law made it possible for an African American man living in the North to be consigned to slavery in the South upon the testimony of two witnesses. He questions why the churches have not publicly criticized this law. Religion, he says, should not be simply a “form of worship” but a “vital principle requiring active benevolence, justice, love and good will towards man.” It should offer support and protection to Blacks who fear deportation to the South. Most prominent ministers, North and South, he claims, cling to the idea “that we ought to obey man’s law before the law of God.” In his Second Inaugural Address, Lincoln would echo Douglass’s thoughts about the sin of silence in the face of evil. Lincoln saw the Civil War theologically as God’s punishment to the South for having slavery and to the North for allowing it. In the climax of this section, Douglass warns ominously and presciently that the existence of slavery would damage the Nation. He set before the audience’s eyes the image of slavery as a lurking, parasitic beast. “Oh! Be warned! Be warned! A horrible reptile is coiled up in your nation’s bosom; the venomous creature is nursing at the tender breast of your youthful repub-

lic; for the love of God, tear it away.” In less than ten years the reptile would spring forth in civil war wherein 603,000 American lives were lost and the circumstances of Black Americans changed forever.

Finally, Douglass comes to the question of the Constitution. Whether the Constitution was a pro-slavery or an anti-slavery document was hotly debated by abolitionists (Chesebrough 40-41). Earlier Douglass had wavered in his belief, maintaining in 1849 that “I am satisfied that if strictly ‘construed according to its reading,’ it is not a pro-slavery instrument.” He admitted, however, that the framers had made it a pro-slavery instrument (Chesebrough 39). After he broke with Garrison in May of 1851, Douglass came to espouse the views of “political abolitionists” such as Gerrit Smith, who argued that the Constitution understood outside of its historical circumstances, opposed slavery (McClure 428-29; Lucaites 55). If that proposition was true, then political action could be used to bring about its abolition.

In the 1852 Independence Day oration, Douglass attempts to redeem the Nation’s founders from the charge that in writing the Constitution they contradictorily affirmed both liberty and slavery. Douglass’s use of *anamnesis* first appears in the paradoxical request to remember what is *not* written in the Constitution. He asks: “If the Constitution were intended to be by its framers and adopters, a slave-holding instrument, why neither slavery, slaveholding, nor slave can anywhere be found in it?” Douglass argues a literalist interpretation of the Constitution: “Now take the constitution according to its plain reading, and I defy the presentation of a single pro-slavery clause in it.” He then declares that it is a right, if not an obligation, for “every American citizen. . . to form an opinion of the constitution, and to propagate that opinion, and to use all honorable means to make his opinion the prevailing one.” Douglass sees the correct understanding of the Constitution as a vehicle by which to expand the idea of liberty to include African Americans, to

keep the “great stream” from drying up. Surely this is his aim, although he leaves the “full and fair discussion,” of the subject for a later time.

In his conclusion, Douglass returns to the Declaration of Independence, and its “great principles.” He also expresses faith in the future and in the promise that technology and commerce will make known American social evils that formerly could be hidden: “Oceans no longer divide, but link nations together. . . . Space is comparatively annihilated. . . . No abuse, no outrage whether in taste, sport or avarice, can now hide itself from the all-pervading light.” The conclusion offers further ironies. Although opposed to William Lloyd Garrison’s views on the Constitution, Douglass concludes with Garrison’s five stanza poem, “The Triumph of Freedom.” Douglass had spoken earlier of slaves “whose chains . . . are . . . rendered more intolerable by the jubilee shouts that reach them.” Garrison’s *paean* anticipates “the year of jubilee,” but in contrast to the celebration of American liberty that Douglass had acknowledged and then scorned as hypocritical, the heartfelt jubilee the poem prophesies would occur when the “oppress’d” “wear the yoke of tyranny like brutes no more.” Unlike the American Fourth of July, this is the celebration to which Douglass could lift his voice in unqualified support.

Douglass’s 1875 Address

In argument, style, and tenor, Frederick Douglass’s Reconstruction rhetoric differs markedly from his antebellum addresses. Unlike his 1852 declamation, Douglass’s 1875 speech made little use of irony and matched many of the changes to the genre adopted by other Fourth of July speakers in Reconstruction. For critic Cedric Lawson, the oratory of this period was “somewhat acrimonious in character and dealt with charges and countercharges arising out of the war.” Speakers often adopted styles featuring “simplicity of diction and optimism over the future” (Lawson 23). A careful observer of social trends, Douglass likewise adapted

his Independence Day oratory to the new plain style, but continued to challenge the genre’s conventions with a prophetic and foreboding tone.

Delivered in Hillsdale, just outside of Washington, D.C., Douglass’s 1875 oration “The Color Question” is perhaps one of the least studied of Douglass’s canon. Conscious of dramatic change in the societal position of former slaves, Douglass used this opportunity to “say a few plain words of matters suggested by the facts of the present hour” and to speculate on what the future might hold for the newly freed Americans in light of the imminent Centennial celebration in the year ahead. Roughly following a chronological order, Douglass’s typed speech of eight pages, less than half the length of his 1852 address, is divided into three main points: the past and present status of newly freed Americans, the great change in their condition, and the means by which they should work out their destiny. Because the Fourth of July fell on a Sunday that year, Douglass again addressed his audience on the fifth.

Mirroring the style of other Reconstruction Fourth of July orations, Douglass directly states: “I am not here to glorify the heroes of the American Revolution.” Douglass’s opening remarks suggest that he will reanimate the well-worn paradox of expressly refusing to praise what the occasion should impel him to praise. However, this is not the case, for Douglass concedes the Nation’s founders were “great men” responsible for “great events.” His praise is tempered only by his desire to address the pressing problems facing former slaves.

In 1852, Douglass asked what to the slave *is* the Fourth of July. His answer then bore upon the exclusion of the slave from the blessings of liberty. The first main point of his 1875 speech references another question. If asked “what colored people have to do with the Fourth of July,” he would readily answer, “almost everything of vital importance.” Recollecting the role Blacks played in relation to whites allowed Douglass to illustrate to his audience how whites and Blacks

were forever bound by blood shed in wars and a shared cultural history:

We have never forsaken the white man in any great emergency, and never expect to forsake him. We have been with him in times of peace and in times of war, and at all times. We were with him in the darkest hours of the Revolution of 1776. We were with him in the war for free trade and sailors rights in 1812. We were with him in 1861. We were with him at Bunker Hill and at Red Bank. We were with him on the land and with him on the water, and with him everywhere.

In this passage the repetition of “we have and “we were,” an example of the stylistic device of *anaphora*, adds emphasis to his point that Blacks and whites were separated by race, but are now united by Nation. For Douglass, the freed slave was lucky to have been on the winning side of the recent war: “Fortune favored us with a liberal hand.” But following the war, Douglass no longer wanted the free Black to rely on fortune, insisting that people are only free when they can determine their own destinies.

The Civil War sealed the great divide between the North and the South over slavery, but not over the treatment of Blacks. As Reconstruction speeches began to reflect a “healing” motif for former white combatants, Douglass well understood that the once warring whites would soon make peace among themselves. For example, Roger A. Pryor, a Brigadier General in the Confederate Army, would declare in a Decoration Day speech in 1877 that the Civil War was not about slavery, but that it had only been the “occasion not the cause of secession” (Blight, *Race and Reunion*, 89-91). For Douglass, the upcoming Centennial in 1876 would almost surely mark an inflection point in the process of reconciliation spearheaded by Northern and Southern politicians and orators.

In the second main point of the speech Douglass turned his attention to the importance of the recent war and what it represented to Blacks— a “change in our condition.” In a relatively short point, only two paragraphs long and less than one typed page, Douglass notes that people “will not quarrel and fight forever,” anticipating the upcoming Centennial as a moment in history where the once divided Nation would “lift to the sky” its voices “in one grand . . . hosanna of peace and good.” This imminent and lasting peace among the whites, although a welcome change, was for Douglass also a cause of grave concern.

In the longest and concluding point of his speech, Douglass shifts his primarily Black audience’s attention away from the peace among whites to a consideration of what is to become of the newly freed, masterless slave: “If war among the whites brought peace and liberty to the Blacks, what will peace among the whites bring?” He even notes that the “signs of the times, are not all in our favor.” Douglass argued for the development of a new Black consciousness, one in which former slaves no longer depended on white paternalism. If Ulysses S. Grant was “our shelter in the storms of the past,” then determining “who will shield us in the future” was of the utmost importance. For Douglass, Blacks not only could, but must, produce their own leaders to give voice to their perspective in a new Nation recovering from a Civil War, which many saw as bringing “a new birth of freedom,” as Lincoln had urged in the Gettysburg address. Douglass used this opportunity to assure his audience “that the colored race is capable of living more than a life of dependence, and can think and speak for itself.”

Douglass’s use of a celebratory oration that traditionally reflected on the Revolutionary War to discuss what the Civil War meant for the future of newly freed slaves, reflects Douglass’s decision to break with the Garrisonians nearly twenty five years earlier. If the Declaration of Independence was an anti-slavery document, the

Civil War could be interpreted as the next step in the fulfillment of an American promise of equality made by the “great men” Douglass had briefly praised at the start of his speech. The citizenship granted to African Americans by the Fourteenth Amendment in 1868 incited a new spate of racist pronouncements during Reconstruction. Many whites who had once favored slavery contended that some free Blacks were actually safer and better served as slaves. Blight observes: “the entire racist theory that slavery protected and nurtured blacks” was the exigency that “forced Douglass to argue for an aggressive use of memory” (“What Will Peace” 211). Douglass could not allow racist romanticism to taint what was to be a newly shaped national history.

In his attempt to call for a new Black consciousness, a new voice of Black self-determination, Douglass recollects why the Revolutionary War was fought. The issue of equality and self-determination is so important for Douglass that he chooses to offer a new declaration closely modeled after the “Great Declaration” of 1776. For nearly twenty-five years, Douglass had directed his audiences to recollect, and thereby revise in memory, the Declaration of Independence as an anti-slavery document. On this point he was consistent and unwavering. But the realist in Douglass also understood it would be difficult for newly freed slaves to resist the “so-called benevolent societies” that wished to “help” them. Even Northern whites who truly did wish to help the freed slaves should be approached with skepticism. The rise of “freedmen’s aid societies” spread like an infestation after the Civil War, some legitimate and some filled with swindlers. Eventually, Northern whites had to compromise with Southerners when they realized Reconstruction would require participation from all parties (Drake). Given the compromises, Douglass observes: “We have been in many instances injured more than benefitted.” To play upon the emotions of wealthy benefactors, it was not unusual for these aid societies to portray freed Blacks as incompetent and in

need of white assistance. Douglass knew this all too well: “[T]hey draw the most distressing picture of the black man’s character and condition. They keep the public mind constantly upon the poor, wretched negro, and thus damn the whole race. . . .” In the new, free America, Douglass told his audience to resist this new form of self-imposed slavery: “We must not beg men for us what we ought to do ourselves.” His final exhortation is that all Americans “now and here denounce and repudiate all such shams.”

Conclusion

In many respects, Frederick Douglass’s 1852 and 1875 Fourth of July speeches are opposite yet complementary. The first is prolix in argument and copious in language, addressed primarily to whites, and relying heavily on irony. The second is concise and linguistically spare, addressed primarily to newly freed Blacks, and virtually free of irony. How might one summarize the comparison of the two speeches? Following his break with the Garrisonians, Douglass invited his audience to recollect the ideals of the Declaration detached from its historic context. By looking backward with a new lens, Douglass took his audience forward to a day when his vision of what the Declaration truly means would be fulfilled. Liberally used in both of his Fourth of July orations, *anamnesis*, the stylistic device embodying the idea of recollection, was the means by which Douglass could envision the future ideal. Unlike the Garrisonians, Douglass remembered a revered American text in a light that made it possible for African Americans to identify themselves with the Nation. Additionally, a racial dialectic is consistently at work within Douglass’s rhetoric. While urging all American to unite under the banner of equality, he simultaneously recognizes the need for a unique and independent Black consciousness and voice. W.E.B. DuBois would later refer to this dialectic as the “double-consciousness” of Black America. In 1897 DuBois asks: “Am I an American or am I a Negro? Can I be both?”

(Bell 140). As John Lucaites notes, “many of the advocates of American racial equality have since treated this ‘two-ness’ as the primary problem facing the cultural assimilation of the black person into American culture” (64). In recent American history, the dialectic informing

Douglass’s speeches surfaces in the rhetoric of such diverse voices as Malcolm X and Martin Luther King Jr. (Lucaites and Condit). Tellingly, the important questions first posed by Douglass so many years ago, are the same questions all Americans are still struggling to answer.

Works Cited

- Allen, R.E. “Anamnesis in Plato’s *Meno* and *Phaedo*,” *The Review of Metaphysics* 13 (1959): 165-74. Print.
- Banninga, Jerald L. “John Quincy Adams’ Address of July 4, 1821,” *Quarterly Journal of Speech* 53 (1967): 44-49. Print.
- Bell, Bernard W. “The African-American Jeremiad and Frederick Douglass’s Fourth of July 1852 Speech.” *The Fourth of July: Political Oratory and Literary Reactions, 1776-1876*. Eds. Paul Goetsch and Gerd Hurm. Tuebingen: Gunter Narr Verlag, 1992. 139-54. Print.
- Blassingame, John W., ed. *The Frederick Douglass Papers Series One: Speeches, Debates, and Interviews, Vol 1: 1841-46*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 1979. Print.
- Black, Edwin. “The Sentimental Style” in his *Rhetorical Questions: Studies in Public Discourse*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992. Print.
- Blight, David. *Race and Reunion: The Civil War in American Memory*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2001. Print.
- _____. “‘What Will Peace Among the Whites Bring?’: Reunion and Race in the Struggle over the Memory of the Civil War in American Culture.” *When the Shooting is Over: The Order and the Memory*. Quaderni IV. Ed. Loretta Valtz Mannucci. Milano: Universita di Milana, 1998.
www.library.vanderbilt.edu/Quaderno/Auaderno4/quaderno4.html. Web.
- _____. “What to the Slave is the Fourth of July,” *Time*, 26 June 2005,
<http://www.time.com/time/nation/article/0,8599,1077058,00html> as retrieved on April 24, 2008.23:26:22gmt. Web.
- Chesebrough, David W. *Frederick Douglass: Oratory from Slavery*. Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1998. Print.
- Douglass, Frederick. “The Color Question.” Hillsdale. 5 July 1875. Address.
- Douglass, Frederick. “What to the Slave is the Fourth of July?” Rochester Ladies Anti-Slavery Society, Rochester, New York. 5 July 1852. Address.
- Drake, Richard B. “Freedmen’s Aid Societies and Sectional Compromise,” *The Journal of Southern History* 29 (1963): 175-86. Print.
- Duffy, Bernard K. “The Platonic Functions of Epideictic Rhetoric,” *Philosophy and Rhetoric* 16 (1983): 79-93. Print.
- Engels, Jeremy. “Uncivil Speech: Invective and the Rhetorics of Democracy in the Early Republic,” *Quarterly Journal of Speech* 95 (2009): 311-34. Print.
- Fulkerson, Gerald. “Frederick Douglass (1818-1895), Abolitionist, Reformer,” in *African-American Orators: A BioCritical Sourcebook*. Ed. Richard W. Leeman. Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1996. 82-97. Print.
- Garrison, William Lloyd. “Address to the Colonization Society.” Park Street Church, Boston. 4 July 1829. Address.
- Goetsch, Paul, and Gerd Hurm. Eds. *The Fourth of July: Political Oratory and Literary Reactions, 1776-1876*. Tuebingen: Gunter Narr Verlag, 1992. Print.
- Heintze, James R. *A Primer for the Study of Independence Day Orations*.

- <http://www1.american.edu/heintze/Primer.html> as retrieved on June 11, 2010. Web.
- Jasinski, James. "Rearticulating History in Epideictic Discourse: Frederick Douglass's 'The Meaning of the Fourth of July to the American Negro.'" In *Rhetoric and Political Culture in Nineteenth-Century America*. Ed. Thomas W. Benson. East Lansing: Michigan State University Press, 1997. 71-89. Print.
- Lampe, Gregory P. *Frederick Douglass: Freedom's Voice, 1818-1845*. East Lansing, MI: Michigan State University Press, 1998. Print.
- Lawson, Cedric. "Patriotism in Carmine: 162 Years of July 4th Oratory," *Quarterly Journal of Speech* 26 (1940): 12-25. Print.
- Lucaites, John. "The Irony of 'Equality' in Black Abolitionist Discourse: The Case of Frederick Douglass's 'What to the Slave is the Fourth of July?'" In *Rhetoric and Political Culture in Nineteenth-Century America*. Ed. Thomas W. Benson. East Lansing: Michigan State University Press, 1997. 47-69. Print.
- Lucaites, John, and Celeste Condit. "Reconstructing <Equality>: Culturetypal and Counter-Cultural Rhetorics in the Martyred Black Vision," *Communication Monographs* 57 (1990): 5-24. Print.
- Martin, Howard H. "The Fourth of July Oration," *Quarterly Journal of Speech* 44 (1958): 393-401. Print.
- Martin, Waldo E., Jr. *The Mind of Frederick Douglass*. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1984. Print.
- McClure, Kevin. "Frederick Douglass's Use of Comparison in His Fourth of July Oration: A Textual Analysis," *Western Communication Journal* 64 (2000): 425-44. Print.
- Rohler, Lloyd. "William Lloyd Garrison." In *American Orators Before 1900: Critical Studies and Sources*. Eds. Bernard K Duffy and Halford Ryan. Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1987. 183-89. Print.
- Scott, Dominic. "Platonic Anamnesis Revisited," *The Classical Quarterly* 37 (1987): 346-66. Print.
- Travers, Len. *Celebrating the Fourth*. Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1997. Print.
- Terrill, Robert E. "Irony, Silence, and Time: Frederick Douglass on the Fifth of July," *Quarterly Journal of Speech* 89 (2003):216-34. Print.
- Weaver, Richard M. "The Spaciousness of Old Oratory," in his *The Ethics of Rhetoric*. Chicago: Henry Regnery, 1953. Print.
- _____. *Visions of Order: The Cultural Crisis of Our Time*. Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1964. Print.