

# Frederick Douglass's Strident View on Black Masculinity in His Later Years

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## **Introduction**

Frederick Douglass (1818-95), one of the most outstanding leaders of black<sup>1</sup> struggle against slavery and for their rights in the nineteenth century, held the germ of assertion of black manhood as soon as he started his career as an abolitionist. Since his first autobiography, *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, an American Slave, Written by Himself* (1845), he had expressed the importance and necessity of black manhood on behalf of black emancipation. Douglass showed the fact that the white's negation of black man's manhood actually equated to that of black humanity.

Douglass's masculinity discourse effectively and successfully helped blacks to raise their voice against slavery during antebellum and Civil War (1861-65) period.<sup>2</sup> However, his masculinity discourse generally appears to be lost by the time of the re-degradation of African Americans' circumstances after the Reconstruction (1865-77). In this article, I would like to scrutinize Douglass's masculinity discourse in his later years, and attempt to reveal the fact that he continued to uphold the strident view on black masculinity until very late in his life.

## **1. Facing the Issue of Re-Degradation**

During the period from after the Reconstruction to the 1890s, the numbers of brutal lynchings of African Americans increased and prejudicial influence upon white assessment of black character still lingered on in the popular culture, such as minstrel shows. The institution of slavery as a system had been abolished for decades, but the slavery spirit supported by racism was still alive in the society.

Not only did whites despise and degrade blacks, blacks themselves suffered from self-degradation, as Douglass lamented: "It has been our misfortune to be educated by two hundred years of slavery to respect white men and despise ourselves" (*TFDP* 4: 418).

Douglass as an idealist saw the Civil War as the bridge from wartime emancipation and black enlistment to peacetime racial democracy, but he as a realist knew that this final goal could only be reached through power politics against a resurgent racism and embittered war memories (Blight, *Frederick Douglass* 13-14). After the Civil War, according to David W. Blight, "race was so deeply at the root of the war's causes and consequences, and so powerful a source of division in American social psychology, that it served as the antithesis of a culture of reconciliation" (*Race* 4). Thus, when the Reconstruction was finished, the cause of the war of Emancipation was gradually lost, and African Americans were excluded from the memory of the war. White Americans' collective memory of the war became the war fought by brave white men in blue and gray as if there were no brave black men who fought for their liberty and civil rights. Most of all, Douglass objected to the historical construction, based on white supremacy, that portrayed emancipation as a great national "failure." The growing argument, made by some blacks as well as whites, that slavery had protected and civilized blacks, while freedom had gradually sent them "falling into a state of barbarism," forced him to argue for aggressive vigilance about memory (Blight, *Race* 317).<sup>3</sup>

The Emancipation destroyed the institution of slavery but there remained deep-rooted racism in the American society. Thus the slavery "system" had gone, but the slavery "spirit" was still lingering on; the "spirit" was condensed into the "race" problem. After the Reconstruction the white backlash was raging against blacks; Douglass still perceived the importance of black masculinity, and black people's sense of pride and dignity.<sup>4</sup> The white refusal to acknowledge black manhood fit into their racist conspiracy to portray blacks as inferior and to convince them and others of alleged innate and immutable black inferiority. In the racist and white supremacist view, ideal model of manhood was always white;

blacks were the antithesis of “civilized manhood.” As Douglass once put it as follows: “When prejudice cannot deny the black man’s ability, it denies his race, and claims him as a white man. ... he owes whatever intelligence he possesses to the white race by contract or association” (*LWFD* 4: 179). In his analysis of “The Color Line,” he elaborated upon this point as follows:

We are not, as a race, even permitted to appropriate the virtues and achievements of our individual representatives. Manliness, capacity, learning, laudable ambition, heroic service, by any of our number, are easily placed to the credit of the superior race. One drop of Teutonic blood is enough to account for all good and great qualities occasionally coupled with a colored skin; and on the other hand, one drop of negro blood, though in the veins of a man of Teutonic whiteness, is enough on which to predicate all offensive and ignoble qualities. (*LWFD* 4: 344-45)

Even though the institution of slavery was abolished, there remained the huge problem of race and color. Douglass delivered a speech titled “The Color Question” at the occasion of celebrating Independence Day in Washington, D. C. on July 5, 1875. It was the centennial celebration of America’s independence and Douglass confronted a complex dilemma of its allegiance, hope, and memory. Douglass threw the following question to the predominantly black audience: “If war among the whites brought peace and liberty to the blacks, what will peace among the whites bring?” (*TFDP* 4: 417). Liberty and rights of African Americans were the result of the Civil War as the Second American Revolution, although Douglass had always appropriated the ideology of the first. Black rights were the products of blood, destruction, and fierce political conflict, but no true national consensus was ever gathered around the cause of black liberty and equality except as it was necessary for restoring and re-imagining the republic itself. Douglass had pointed out the problem; indeed the “peace among the whites” brought the disfavor to African Americans, which meant the violent suppression and disenfranchisement of black people.<sup>5</sup>

During the Civil War becoming a “man” killed two racist conceptions of blacks with one stone. In the years before the war, southern whites had defended their peculiar institution of slavery by describing blacks as children or animals, depending on which description made their superiority more rhetorically defensible. The war gave blacks chance to become and be recognized as “men,” and they got the right to vote which embodied both manhood and citizenship. They had been making phenomenal strides in education, the profession, the accumulation of wealth, and literature since emancipation. Nevertheless, white Americans had perversely attacked this black progress through oppressive legislation, disfranchisement, the landlord and tenant system, and the barbarism of lynch law. Douglass lamented on all of the issues, but especially on the last one, lynching: “during all the first years of reconstruction, and long after the war, Negroes were slain by scores.” “The world was shocked by these murders,” according to Douglass’s analysis, “so that the Southern press and people found it necessary to invent, adopt and propagate almost every species of falsehood to create sympathy for themselves” (*FDSSW* 758). It was the fabrication of the stereotype of “the black rapist,” which was related to the wrong notion of blacks’ lack of “civilized manhood.” To put it another way, black men could be “manly” beasts but never be civilized gentlemen according to “the barbaric primitive masculinity” (Horton and Horton 383).

Before the war the black male image embodied in Uncle Tom was social as well as literary. While this feminized black male image was appearing in literary texts, at the same time the image was widely applied as a social discourse that African Americans were feminized as a whole race. To put it another way white people were regarded as a “man,” on the other hand black people were regarded as a “woman” on the ground of gendered perspective, and at the opposite pole whites were positioned as a “man” without regard to male or female. However, that black men had fought as soldiers in the Union Army and they got the vote was undeniable fact, which meant there was no reason for claiming black feminization as a whole race. Therefore the conventional method in the antebellum period was not available anymore to the white supremacists, though they did

not want to admit respectable black manhood.<sup>6</sup> Instead of the former policy they constructed counter discourse against black people through equating civilization and manhood. By the time of around the 1890s, hegemonic discourses accepted “manly” as a synonym for “civilized.” “Affirming the manly power of the white man’s ‘civilization,’ ” according to Gail Bederman, “was one of the most powerful ways middle-class men found to assert their interwoven racial, class, and gender dominance” (“Civilization” 212). In fact, “civilization” had become a racial concept in the Darwinist 1890s.<sup>7</sup> By foregrounding racial difference, whites positioned blacks as primitive and savage race and themselves superior civilized race. White men and women were regarded as civilized people because they belonged to the white (Caucasian) race; on the contrary black men and women were regarded as animal-like savages because they belonged to the black (African) race. Under these prejudices here formed the stereotype of “the black rapist” and “the black prostitute.”<sup>8</sup> According to this white supremacist discourse, uncivilized blacks had congenital sexual lust. In this way, whites deprived blacks of human dignity and degraded them to animal-like position. African American man was not respectable man anymore but only a male equivalent to male animal.

## **2. Reshaping Black Masculinity in the Age of Re-Degradation**

At the height of the lynching era in 1892 Douglass became friends with a young black journalist Ida B. Wells (1862-1931), and praised her campaign against lynching. She remained a pioneer of the antilynching crusade until well into the twentieth century, after the demise of Douglass. They shared several views on lynching and relation of manhood with it. Wells countered the stereotype of the black rapist that the African American man as the emblem of uncontrolled lust and sexual violence with evidence of white men’s abuse of black women; which is why Douglass himself was called “mulatto” or “light-skinned.” His father was said to be his white master, Aaron Anthony. Douglass keenly pointed out the fact that white masters had been insulting enslaved black women: “Slavery itself ... was a system of unmitigated, legalized outrage upon black women of the South,

and no white man was ever shot, burned or hanged for availing himself of all the power that slavery gave him at this point" (*FDSSW* 761). He showed lynching as the work of cowardice, and debunked white apologists who depicted lynching as manly defense of white woman's purity. In fact, to "white Southerners who wished to preserve racial hierarchy in the absence of slavery," Martha Hodes argues that "it was crucial that both elite and nonelite white women minded the boundaries of the color line and gave birth only to white children." Without slavery in order to differentiate blacks from poor whites, ideas about the purity of white women should include poor women. Hodes points out "an important effect" of characterization of all white women as pure: "it made sex between a black man and white woman by definition rape, because 'pure' white woman, no matter how poor, could not possibly (in white minds) desire sex with a black man" (202). Related to this Douglass pointed out: "An abandoned woman has only to start a cry, true or false, that she had been insulted by a black man, to have him arrested and summarily murdered by the mob" (*FDSSW* 753).

According to Derrick Bell, before the Civil War, rich slave owners persuaded poor whites "to stand with them against the danger of slave revolts, even though the existence of slavery condemned white workers to a life of economic privation." And after the war, "poor whites fought social reforms and settled for segregation rather than see formerly enslaved blacks get ahead" (8). Thus, poor whites were in economic competition with formerly enslaved blacks, but the powerful discourse of race blinded the poor whites to economic reality, causing them to over-value race as the only thing of value they possessed. As a result whites were rallied on the basis of racial pride to accept their often lowly lot in life, and encouraged to vent their frustration by opposing any serious advancement by blacks, as Douglass had pointed out below. In the same year when he first met Wells, Douglass wrote "Lynch Law in the South." He keenly pointed out: "The Negro meets no resistance when on a downward course. It is only when he rises in wealth, intelligence, and manly character that he brings upon himself the heavy hand of persecution." Douglass contended that whites were satisfied when a black man "conforms to a popular standard of what a Negro should be"

which meant being in degraded and ignorant situation. But once a black man shook off his rags and wretchedness and presumed to be “a man, and a man among men,” whites never allowed him to contradict this popular standard. Douglass showed the fact that a black man could “ride in a first-class car as a servant, as an appendage to a white man,” but it was “not allowed to ride in his quality of manhood alone” (FDSSW 748). Thus, for whites, blacks were acknowledged as second-rated citizens, but never admitted the same citizenship as whites. Political power and citizenship were of the main notion of manhood at that time; Douglass knew that “the loss of the vote was both a political suffocation and emasculation” once Wells indicated (Carby 113).

On this point of lynching and disfranchisement, Douglass stated more clearly and strongly in the pamphlet titled *The Reason Why the Colored American Is Not in the World's Columbian Exposition* (1893). The pamphlet was published as a protest against the failure to appoint an African American as a commissioner, or a member of an important committee, or even a guide or guard on the Exposition grounds at the Columbian World Exposition in Chicago in 1893<sup>9</sup>; as Douglass later day put it “was evidently an intentional slight to the race” (FDSSW 764).<sup>10</sup>

In the pamphlet on the exposition, Douglass wrote chapter 1 “Introduction” and Wells wrote one of the essays in it. Douglass began with the following statements: “The colored people of America are not indifferent to the good opinion of the world, and we have made every effort to improve our first years of freedom and citizenship. We earnestly desired to show some results of our first thirty years of acknowledged manhood and womanhood.” But to them the chance was not given at all. Instead of proving American civilization, which black Americans had contributed to, they appeared in the disgraceful exhibition and an example of savageness at the moment of celebrating “American Republican liberty and civilization” (7). Actually, organizers of the exposition divided the World's Fair into two racially specific areas; The White City depicted the millennial advancement of manly white civilization, on the contrary the Midway Plaisance presented the undeveloped barbarism of uncivilized, dark races

(Bederman, *Manliness* 31).<sup>11</sup> Douglass problematized these facts that the “White City took no account of the inhumanity endured by black Americans; the Midway was a parade of insulting buffoonery” (McFeely 372).

Douglass wrote in the pamphlet: “In the time of slavery if a Negro was formerly killed, the owner sustained a loss of property. Now he is not restrained by any fear of such loss” (11). Wells reiterated the same point: “the white owner rarely permitted his anger to go so far as to take a life, which would entail upon him a loss of several hundred dollars. The slave was rarely killed, he was too valuable.”<sup>12</sup> On the outrageous accusation of “the black rapist” Douglass commented: “He was formerly accused of petty thefts, called a chicken thief and the like, but seldom or never was he accused of the atrocious crime of feloniously assaulting white women. If we may believe his accusers this is a new development” (11–12). Indeed, whites’ cry about “assaults upon white women” was only a new excuse to justify their continued persecution of blacks, a new device to keep them in chains.<sup>13</sup> Douglass analyzed and demolished every excuse offered by the defenders of lynching and exposed real reasons for the brutal murder of African Americans in the South:

During all the war, when there was the fullest and safest opportunity for such assaults, nobody ever heard of such being made by him. Thousands of white women were left for years in charge of Negroes, while their fathers, brothers and husbands were absent fighting the battles of the rebellion; yet there was no assault upon such women by Negroes, and no accusation of such assault. It is only since the *Negro has become a citizen and a voter that this change has been made.* (emphases added 12)

The same notion about lynching Wells shared with Douglass: “the countless massacres of defenseless Negroes, whose only crime was the attempt to exercise their right to vote.”<sup>14</sup> Thus, the most important point of this highly sexualized problem was, in fact, really a political and, at the same time, economic one. Douglass continued: “The enemies of the Negro see that he is making progress

and they naturally wish to stop him and keep him in just what they consider his proper place” (14). Crucial to this situation was the unstated consensus among the mass of whites that they would accept large disparities in economic opportunity in respect to other whites as long as they had a priority over blacks for access to the few opportunities available.

While lamenting and denouncing whites’ “depravity of human nature” from blacks, Douglass concluded the chapter by insisting upon black masculinity: “We are men and our aim is perfect manhood, to be men among men. Our situation demands faith in ourselves, faith in the power of truth, faith in work and faith in the influence of manly character” (15). In other words, Douglass invoked the idea of black manhood equating it, as before and during the war, with freedom, economic independence, citizenship, and moreover political rights. And in an effort to invert dominant ideas that equated black people with savagery and white people with civilization Douglass acknowledged the necessity of black manhood, as later Wells pleaded with black men to defend their “name and manhood from this vile accusation.”<sup>15</sup> Although Douglass and Wells were both activists of women’s equality, they accepted “manly” as a synonym for “civilized.” Rather this was “not because they themselves identified civilization with men,” as Bederman explains “but because they understood that hegemonic discourses of civilization marginalized African Americans by denigrating their manhood.” Therefore, as Bederman concludes “their antiracist version of civilization strategically mobilized ‘manliness’ in the interest of rewriting the relation between civilization and race” (*Manliness* 250n 146).

Douglas ended the chapter with the following sentences:

Let the truth be told, let the light be turned on ignorance and prejudice, let lawless violence and murder be exposed. The Americans are a great and magnanimous people and this great exposition adds greatly to their honor and renown, but in the pride of their success they have cause for repentance as well as complaisance, and for shame as well as for glory, and hence we send forth this volume to be read of all men. (16)

Douglass revised the hegemonic civilization discourse, which debarred African Americans from participating in the exposition, and turned it to their advantage. He thoroughly revealed who was ignorant and prejudiced; who was violent and murderous; and who had to be repent and be ashamed. It was not black Americans but white Americans who were to shoulder that dishonor and disgrace. In the true sense, excluding African Americans from the Columbian Exposition did not demonstrate glory of white American civilization at all but white American barbarism, and conversely, the exemplars of civilized American manhood were those who excluded from the White City, African Americans.

Douglass passed away on February 20, 1895, two years after the publication of the pamphlet. As if he was aware that this was the last blow he would strike for his people, Douglass poured all his utmost power into his endeavor to reshape black manhood against re-degradation of African Americans.

### **Conclusion**

In his very later years Frederick Douglass attacked pseudo white civilization by logically explained why so many blacks were lynched: they acquired the right to vote as citizens. Moreover, in his "Introduction" to *The Reason Why the Colored American Is Not in the World's Columbian Exposition*, he transformed the hegemonic civilization discourse, revealed "a whited sepulcher," and turned it to African Americans' advantage. Douglass vigorously revealed that the exposition, "with its splendid display of wealth and power, its triumphs of art and its multitudinous architectural and other attractions," was "a fair indication of the elevated and liberal sentiment of the American people" (9), not only white but also black Americans. Thus, American "civilization" or America itself must not have existed without tears, blood and hard hands of African Americas. It was African Americans who truly deserved the civilized American manhood. As I presented in this article, for Douglass manhood and masculinity always mattered for the liberation of blacks. He had devoted his whole life to create politically favorable discourse by the strategic use of masculinity on behalf of his people's liberation. His assertion of black manhood cannot be derived only from

the examination of gender theory of present time. His assertion of black manhood transcends the norms of masculinity determined by cultural constructions and is extended to the norms of humanity. He had been trying to elevate masculine gender ideal to humanity by utilizing not only gendered but also sexualized perspectives. Because Douglass utilized both sex and sexuality, only manhood cannot define his masculinity strategy. Therefore Douglass's masculinity discourse occurred at the intersections of race, gender and even sexuality. Its categorical contingency changed according to the historical situation or circumstances of African Americans. That is to say, Douglass intentionally and accordingly changed his strategy by the waves of the time. Indeed, his whole life itself was a part of his masculinity strategy.<sup>16</sup> As a leader of the race in the nineteenth century Douglass had preceded those twentieth century black leaders. Before Booker T. Washington (1856-1915) stressed vocational education and economic self-help, before W. E. B. Du Bois (1868-1963) called for political rights, and before Martin Luther King Jr. (1929-68) led the Civil Rights Movement, Douglass had already advocated all of these tactics in order to advance the rights of African Americans.

#### Notes

- <sup>1</sup> The conventional name for Americans of African descent historically has been changed. In Douglass's days "colored" or "negro/Negro" were often used by identifying themselves in a positive way. During the twentieth century it changed from "Afro-American" to "African American." In this article I use mainly two identifications "African American" and "black," since African American is the most recent trend by which they call themselves and black is still the most common colloquial term.
- <sup>2</sup> For a more detailed argument, see Park, "Silence."
- <sup>3</sup> For further detail of the issue, see Blight's *Race and Reunion*.
- <sup>4</sup> In this highly racialized American society of the end of nineteenth century, Douglass dared to hail black manhood again by invoking Toussaint L'Ouverture as an ideal model of black masculinity. Douglass countered white superiority that Toussaint's greatness was nothing to do with racial heritage of white because he was perfectly African descent, and asserted that blacks' greatest significance lay in their ability to correct white prejudice based on racism. He knew the need of black role model and

kept asking himself what was the most effective template for representation of black male heroism. Douglass transformed Toussaint's heroism from eighteenth-century St. Domingo to late-nineteenth-century U. S. to provide security against escalating white persecutions and re-degradation of black people. For a more detailed argument on Douglass and Toussaint L'Ouverture, see Park, "Transcription."

- <sup>5</sup> Actually, it took about a hundred years to take their civil rights back, until Martin Luther King Jr. appeared and led the Civil Rights Movement in the twentieth century.
- <sup>6</sup> For example, Gail Bederman argues: "The trope 'the white man' also linked powerful manhood to race. When 1890s whites spoke of 'the white man,' they usually paired him with 'the negro' or 'the Indian.' Referring to 'the black man' or 'the red man,' the logical parallel construction, would mean conceding that black and red men were equally manly—thus undercutting the ideological work of the phrase 'the white man' " ("Civilization" 212).
- <sup>7</sup> Bederman continues: "Gender was an essential component of civilization, for extreme sexual difference was seen as a hallmark of civilization's advancement. Savage (that is, nonwhite) men and women were almost identical, but civilized races had evolved the pronounced sexual differences celebrated in the middle-class's doctrine of 'separate spheres.' Civilized women were 'womanly'—spiritual, motherly, dedicated to the home. And civilized white men were the most manly ever evolved—firm of character, self-controlled, protectors of women and children." ("Civilization" 213)
- <sup>8</sup> Before emancipation there was the myth that black females were inherently wanton and therefore responsible for rape though it was mass sexual exploitation of enslaved black women by white men actually.
- <sup>9</sup> Ironically enough, debarred from representing his own nation, Douglass had been named Haiti's representative to the exposition by the Haitian government. To help run Haitian pavilion Douglass hired young black poet Paul Laurence Dunbar (1872–1906), who later commemorated Douglass in his poetry titled "Frederick Douglass" (1895).
- <sup>10</sup> The sentence was an excerpt from Douglass's last great address "Why Is the Negro Lynched?: The Lesson of the Hour" delivered in Washington, D. C., on January 9, 1894 (*FDSSW* 750–76). In this speech Douglass analyzed and demolished those excuses offered by the defenders of lynching and exposed the real reasons of it, as he brilliantly showed in "Introduction" of *The Reason Why the Colored American Is Not in the World's Columbian Exposition*.
- <sup>11</sup> On details of the exhibits of "the undeveloped barbarism of uncivilized, dark races" on Midway Plaisance, see *A History of the World's Columbian Exposition Held in Chicago in 1893*, vol. 2 315–57.

- <sup>12</sup> *A Red Record: Tabulated Statistics and Alleged Causes of Lynchings in the United States, 1892-1893-1894* 7. (reel 26 in *DP*). A Red Record carries a letter from Douglass to Wells as preface on page 5.
- <sup>13</sup> Douglass never denied that there were “bad Negroes” in his country capable of committing this crime, or any other crime that other men can or do commit. He suggested the possibility of “bad white men” as well as “bad black men” south, north or wherever (“Introduction” 12).
- <sup>14</sup> *A Red Record* 9. (reel 26 in *DP*).
- <sup>15</sup> *A Red Record* 11. (reel 26 in *DP*).
- <sup>16</sup> Douglass was sometimes criticized that he had internalized white middle class patriarch and Victorian standard of strong paternalism. However, he had to give ammunition to those who claimed that African Americans lacked parental emotions and were unable to form lasting family relationships. Of cultural necessity, he had to adapt to the Victorian ideal, rather than he choosing to act as patriarch for personal reasons. Since it was the nineteenth century and he was once a slave, Douglass always confronted race prejudice and had to counter it. If we want to argue black paternalism among black leaders we must wait until the emergence of Du Bois’s entrenched one.

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