

Declaration in Douglass's *My Bondage and My Freedom*

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Abstract: In this paper, I develop an account of Frederick Douglass's use of declaration as an emancipatory mode of political action. An act of declaration compels an audience to acknowledge the declarer as possessing a type of normative standing (e.g. personhood or citizenship). Douglass, through acts of declaration like his Fifth of July speech and fight with the 'slavebreaker' Covey, compels American audiences to acknowledge him as a fellow citizen by forcefully enacting a commitment to resist tyranny and oppression. The distinctive emancipatory potential of declaration is grounded in its political epistemology of acknowledgment, on which political actors understand other persons as members of a shared community through the ways in which they comport themselves in relation to one another. Declaration makes political communities more inclusive not only by changing who we understand as fellow members, but how we understand them as such.

I. Introduction

In the "Editor's Preface" to Frederick Douglass's *My Bondage and My Freedom*, the editor publishes a letter from Douglass that states his purpose in penning a second autobiography: "Not only is slavery on trial, but unfortunately, the enslaved people are also on trial" (1855/1987, 4). Douglass observes that public discourse about the legitimacy of slavery inevitably turns to whether enslaved and free Black people are members of the American moral and political community. One main purpose of *Bondage* is to address the challenge posed by the trial of the enslaved by securing enslaved and free Black people standing as full members of the American polity. Securing such standing involves bringing the polity to understand enslaved and free Black Americans as moral persons to whom the polity bears obligations and as political agents who

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have a rightful claim to participate in the polity's political life— it is a project that strives to reforge a more inclusive polity.²

By the early 1850s, when Douglass has broken decisively with the moral suasionist program of the Garrisonians and adopted a stance of political abolitionism, he thinks that a viable antislavery politics must address the trial of the enslaved by availing itself of American political institutions and values. Part of Douglass's strategy in this period is to hold that Black people in the US have a rightful claim to the same civil, political, and legal rights as white Americans because Black Americans are themselves already American citizens. This strategy centrally depends on a conceptual distinction between, on the one hand, citizenship as moral status forged through the enactment of a polity's values and, on the other, citizenship as a legal status conferred by a polity. On Douglass's view, Black Americans make themselves American citizens in the moral sense through resistance against tyranny and oppression. It is because Black Americans are citizens in this moral sense that they ought to be acknowledged as citizens in the legal sense through the conferral and enforcement of a schedule of civil, political, and legal rights. The conception of citizenship as a moral status frames the task of political abolitionism as a matter of bringing a polity to acknowledge who its members are and treat them as such, rather than as persuading the polity to extend the privilege of membership to persons who lack it.³

2 Douglass's assumption of integration (i.e. full incorporation into the American polity) as an aim for antislavery politics derives, on my view, from his assessment that the means for integration are more viable than the means for separatism (i.e. emancipatory strategies that seek to forge distinct communities for oppressed groups). It is not that Douglass thinks that integration is necessary, and so there must be means to achieve it. Rather, Douglass thinks that there are viable means for achieving integration— and these means are more viable than the means for achieving separatist aims— so abolitionists ought to adopt integration as an aim. By contrast, separatists like Martin Delany think that there are viable means for achieving separatism— and these means are more viable than the means for achieving integration— so abolitionists ought to adopt separatism as an aim. On this picture, the strands of integrationism and separatism in antebellum Black emancipatory politics share a fundamentally pragmatist orientation toward emancipation: the shape of liberation is going to be informed in part by the viable means that are available in pursuit of liberation. See (Gooding-Williams 2009, 5-9; Shelby 2003; Yaure 2018).

3 Melvin Rogers attributes a similar conception of citizenship to David Walker in his reading of Walker's

Declaration is one mode of political action through which Douglass seeks to secure acknowledgment of Black Americans as citizens in the moral sense. Acts of declaration, on the interpretation I develop in this paper, forcefully manifest the declarer’s moral and political standing as a member of the community to whom the declaration is directed.⁴ By forcefully manifesting her standing, the declarer compels her audience to acknowledge it— to act in ways that reflect the fact that she possesses such standing. Declaration is a category of political action that cuts across traditional distinctions between speech and violence: Douglass forcefully manifests his standing as an American citizen by seizing the podium in his July 5, 1852 speech “What to the Slave is the Fourth of July;” he also does so by forcefully resisting and overpowering the ‘slavebreaker’ Edward Covey. What unites these seemingly disparate modes of political action is that they bring their audiences to act in ways that respond to the standing of those whose citizenship is forcefully manifested in these acts. Declaration thus captures one

Appeal to the Colored Citizens of the World. Walker, according to Rogers, thinks that “one need not rely on legal recognition to underwrite one’s status as a citizen” (2015, 209). Instead, for Walker, citizenship is an activity

constituted by political judgment. Douglass (on my reading) and Walker (on Rogers’ reading) are both concerned with a conception of citizenship that is independent of, and indeed normatively antecedent to, legal recognition; they both maintain that enslaved and free Black people in the US are already American citizens. Douglass and Walker also both aim to illustrate this conception of citizenship, on which enslaved and free Black Americans are already citizens, through varieties of political action— declaration or appeal. Declaration and appeal make manifest, rather than argue for, the standing of the agent and her audience.

For Douglass, however, what makes one a citizen is clearly the *exercise* of a capacity. For Walker, it is not wholly clear whether it is the *exercise* of political judgment or the *capacity* for political judgment that makes me a citizen. At some times, Walker clearly emphasizes the importance of acting on the basis of one’s political judgment. At other times, however, Walker emphasizes the role of appeal in ‘demonstrating’ the illegitimate, oppressive character of the slave system: “[t]hese positions, I shall endeavour, by the help of the Lord, to demonstrate in the course of this *Appeal*, to the satisfaction of the most incredulous mind” (1829/2011, 8). Walker characterizes appeal as a mode of reasonable argument, which, when executed effectively, will decisively prove to even ‘incredulous’ minds that the slave system is illegitimate and oppressive. In passages like this, Walker situates appeal in a strategy of reasonable argument for addressing oppressive ideology: appeal evinces evidence to establish the veracity of claims for an audience.

4 Note that this account does not rule out the possibility of declaring other varieties of normative standing, such as moral personhood. I focus on the role of declaration in forcefully manifesting the declarer’s standing as a citizen because citizenship-status is an integral aspect of Douglass’s post-Garrisonian political abolitionism.

characteristic which violent and non-violent forms of political action Douglass uses and supports have in common: they aim to reforge the boundaries of the American polity by inducing acknowledgment of Black Americans' standing as citizens.⁵

Acknowledgment, I claim, is the interpretive key to understanding the role of declaration in Douglass's political abolitionist program. Acknowledgment is a practical mode of understanding embodied in our actions. I acknowledge you as a fellow citizen by treating you, in our day-to-day interactions, as a fellow citizen. Acknowledgment, crucially, is a more capacious category of understanding than some forms of recognition, on which understanding someone as (e.g.) a fellow citizen requires the conscious thought that she is a fellow citizen. Bernard Boxill attributes this more demanding sense of recognition to Douglass in his reading of the fight with Covey. For Boxill, Douglass induces Covey to "deliberate more honestly on the evidence of Douglass's humanity" (2018, 80-82). I will argue that Douglass understands the efficacy of his fight to instead consist in a change to Covey's behavior, rather than his consciously affirmed attitudes towards Douglass. This is precisely the kind of change that acknowledgment, but not conscious recognition, captures. I claim that it is precisely in this space beyond conscious recognition that the emancipatory potential of declaration that animates Douglass's political abolitionism resides.

While Douglass does not himself provide an explicit analysis of declaration in terms of acknowledgment, Douglass develop an account of acknowledgment in his Fifth of July speech and *My Bondage and My Freedom*. The interpretation I provide here explains why Douglass thinks that declaration is integral to an effective political abolitionist program (and perhaps why

⁵ On the continuity between violent and non-violent forms of political action in Douglass's thought, see (Boxill 1992, 125-31; Kirkland 1999, 271-95; Bromell 2013, 713-14).

we should affirm this with respect to emancipatory politics today) by elaborating concepts in Douglass's own repertoire in this period. Thus, while I am not transcribing Douglass's own theory of declaration and acknowledgment as such, I take my account of declaration and acknowledgment to be presented in terms that Douglass himself could by and large endorse.

Douglass explicitly declares that Black Americans are already American citizens in an 1853 address, "The Claims of Our Common Cause," at the Colored National Convention in Rochester: "[W]e declare that we are, and of right we ought to be *American Citizens*" (1999, 264). The speech, addressed to "the People of the United States" (and in particular white members of the polity), insists throughout that members of the convention are addressing other Americans as "fellow-citizens" (261-63). The speech, moreover, situates this declaration of citizenship in relation to a commitment to resist tyranny and oppression ("resistance against tyranny is obedience to God") and the Declaration of Independence ("we are American citizens... by the principles of the Declaration of Independence") (260, 264). But read in isolation, "The Claims of Our Common Cause" does not unambiguously illustrate the account of citizenship and declaration that I attribute to Douglass. The connection between resistance against tyranny and citizenship is intermingled with claims to citizenship on the basis of birthright ("By birth, we are American citizens"), and the conferral of legal rights (264-65).⁶ The variety of conceptions of citizenship we find in this address reflects its status as a product of a convention.

But we can crystalize the strand of Douglass's thought concerning republican citizenship and declaration by situating the declaration of citizenship we find in "The Claims of Our Common Cause" in the context of *My Bondage and My Freedom* and Douglass's Fifth of July speech.

6 For an extensive study of the role of birthright citizenship in abolitionist thought, see (Jones 2018).

Together, these moments in Douglass's post-Garrisonian thought articulate a picture of American citizenship as constituted by the enactment of a commitment to resist tyranny and oppression; this in turn casts Douglass's declarations of citizenship not merely as insistent assertions, but as manifestations of political membership that induce acknowledgment in their audiences.

Douglass, throughout these texts, consciously situates his declarations of citizenship in relation to the American Founders and Declaration of Independence. This reflects David Armitage's claim that declarations are a genre: particular instances of a genre situate themselves with respect to earlier instances (as Douglass does with respect to the American Founders), but often in ways that elaborate the genre. Douglass repurposes declaration as a mode of political action for remaking communities, rather than, as Armitage claims of earlier instances of the genre, making states (2007, 17).

Douglass's repurposing of declaration as an instrument of remaking political communities reflects a shift in his understanding of how an effective antislavery politics incorporates the agency of Black political actors. Jeannine DeLombard observes that in *My Bondage and My Freedom*, Douglass breaks with a model of antislavery politics which figures former slaves as witnesses who furnish the public with testimony on the conditions of slavery (2007, 125-49). DeLombard argues that the shift that Douglass effects is one from witnessing to advocacy: "Douglass presented black advocacy as an alternative to the 'plain narration' required of the antislavery witness.... African American civic participation required a black advocacy that foregrounded forensic argumentation even as it retained the personal narrative of racial oppression" (126). Indeed, it is a common (although by no means universal) refrain among Douglass scholars that his political abolitionism in the 1850s is driven by a model of advocacy on which the primary task is to persuade his audiences of the wrongness of slavery and convince

them to contribute to the antislavery struggle (Myers 2008; Buccola 2012; Bennett 2016).

I argue, in contrast, that we should not understand this shift in Douglass's post-Garrisonian political thought in terms of a change in emphasis from one mode of political action to another (witnessing to advocacy). Rather, Douglass's shift in this period ultimately consists in a fundamental reorientation towards the role of agency in reforging a more inclusive polity. For Douglass in this period, the question is not what mode of political action will most persuasively cultivate antislavery sympathies in audiences, but, more fundamentally, what it looks like to reshape the practices of a polity to reflect the rights and powers of its citizenry (in the moral sense). Conscious efforts at persuasion, on my reading of Douglass, are only one aspect of a wider program through which Douglass seeks to induce acknowledgment of Black Americans as citizens by contesting and reshaping the political habits of the polity.

Declaration, as a mode of political action that contests and reshapes the political habits of the polity to induce acknowledgment of Black Americans as citizens, illustrates this reorientation in Douglass's post-Garrisonian political thought. In this way, declaration is integral to Douglass's "enlarged account of political founding moments that foregrounded black contributions and the development of a broad and inclusive notion of an American... political inheritance" (Hooker 2017, 265).⁷ This enlarged account political founding moments consists, as Frank observes, in "radically reimagin[ing]" the "constitutive norms of the polity" on "the conflicted terrain of everyday life" (2010, 227). But this radical reimagining, I claim, consists not only in a first-order shift in *who* the polity understands as a (full) member, but a second-order shift in *how* we understand one another as members of a shared political community, which Douglass casts in

⁷ Hooker observes that this enlarged conception of political community encompasses a "hemispheric" understanding of the American political community. I do not contest this point as reflective of Douglass's political thought, especially in the 1860s and 70s, but will not pursue the issue here.

terms of acknowledging other persons as already fellow citizens, instead of as conferring a status of citizenship upon them.⁸ In other words, the efficacy of declaration in emancipatory politics depends in part on the political epistemology of acknowledgment that it invokes and inculcates in audiences to whom it is directed.

In section II, I sketch the account of citizenship I attribute to Douglass, to get into view the sort of political standing that declaration makes manifest. In section III, I provide two examples of declaration in *Bondage*: Douglass's 1852 Fifth of July speech (an excerpt of which is attached as an appendix to the original edition of *Bondage*) and Douglass's fight with the slave breaker Covey in 1834. In section IV, I explain what acknowledgment consists in: comporting oneself in ways responsive to the standing of another. Declaration compels acknowledgment by forcefully confronting an audience with a manifestation of the declarer's standing as a citizen. Finally, in section V, I develop the political epistemology of acknowledgment as involving direct apprehension of a normative status, contrasting it with epistemologies on which political standing is the target of inquiry into marks and features.

II. Douglass's Conception of Citizenship

In declaring that Black Americans are already American citizens, Douglass understands citizenship as, in the first place, a moral status that justifies one's claim to specific political and legal rights.⁹ Douglass is especially concerned, for instance, with securing claims to the right to

⁸ "Thus in addition to embracing the democratic value of sarcasm, irony, and denunciation, Douglass suggested that the claims made on behalf of those who have no part are also practically enacted, and in many ways acknowledged, by their opponents in everyday life" (Frank 2010, 229).

⁹ Douglass's conception of citizenship is part of a broader category of political membership, on which one is a member of a political community in virtue of participating in the political activity of that community. But, because Douglass's concrete political aim is secure full political and legal rights for Black people in the US, citizenship is the relevant status. This contrasts with weaker forms of political membership which ground claims to more limited rights (e.g., permanent residency) (Song 2016, 2019).

assemble, the right to testify in court, and the right to rebel against tyranny, because these rights are integral to a viable antislavery strategy that avails itself of the political mechanisms of the US (1855/1987, 192, 165; 1881/2012, 173).

Citizenship in the moral sense, for Douglass, consists in the enactment of a commitment to the fundamental principles of the polity. Douglass maintains that one of the fundamental principles of the American polity is a commitment to resist tyranny and oppression. Thus, for Douglass, American citizenship consists (at least in part) in the enactment of a commitment to resist tyranny and oppression. Enslaved and free Black people in the US are already US citizens, on this picture, because they enact a commitment to resist tyranny and oppression through resistance against slavery and white supremacy.¹⁰

We often think of citizenship as a status constituted by the possession of specific political and legal rights. Kymlicka and Norman call this the concept of “citizenship-as-legal-status” (1994, 353). We sometimes say that when someone is deprived of a particular right— e.g., the right to vote— she is deprived of her citizenship. By contrast, on Douglass’s conception of citizenship, one can be a citizen even if one is deprived of specific political and legal rights.¹¹ Douglass’s view is a species of what Kymlicka and Norman call the conception of “citizenship-as-desirable-activity,” on which “the extent and quality of one’s citizenship is a function of one’s participation

10 Enacting a citizenship-constituting commitment, for Douglass, involves cultivating social bonds with others. On Douglass’s conception of American citizenship in particular, one enacts a citizenship-constituting commitment by resisting oppression in ways that cultivate bonds of trust, loyalty, and solidarity. In this regard, Douglass’s conception of citizenship is non-sovereign— what makes me a citizen depends on the way others comport themselves in relation to me (Krause 2015). But crucially, this sense of dependence is not appropriately cast as others conferring citizenship upon me through some formal or conscious process of recognition.

11 This is not to say that a citizen can be *rightfully* denied such rights. Rather, for Douglass, the grounds of citizenship are conceptually prior to the extension of political and legal rights, and the fact that someone is a citizen justifies the extension of certain political and legal rights to her.

in that community” (1994, 353).¹² But, on Douglass’s view, there is a meaningful normative relationship between these two conceptions of citizenship: if I am a citizen in the latter sense, because I participate in the political life of a community, then I ought to be legally recognized as a citizen. Citizenship as moral status is the normative foundation for citizenship as legal status.

The idea of citizenship as a moral status constituted by participation in the political life of a community is part of a more general view on which social relations are constituted by commitments that are enacted over time. Mara Marin articulates a version of this view of social relations in *Connected by Commitment*. According to Marin, social relations constituted by commitments “are relationships that develop over time through the accumulated effect of open-ended actions and responses” (2017, 25). Commitment, according to Marin, is something one does, not something one idly affirms. The normative fabric forged by patterns of action grounds mutual obligations between those connected by commitment (2017, 31, 36).

In the early chapters of *Bondage*, Douglass offers a picture of family relations as constituted by commitments in Marin’s sense. Douglass observes that “[t]he conditions of brotherly and sisterly feeling were wanting” between himself and his siblings because “we had never nestled and played together,” but were instead separated at a young age to work on the Lloyd plantation (1855/1987, 55). Douglass understands his bonds to his siblings as severely strained (if not wholly dissolved) because they are deprived of the opportunity to nestle and play together, and thereby enact commitments to one another. It is in this way, Douglass asserts, that “[t]here is not, beneath the sky, an enemy to filial affection so destructive as slavery” (1855/1987, 43).

Conversely, Douglass comes to see himself as “*somebody’s* child” because of his mother’s care

12 See also Hooker’s category of liminal citizenship: “persons who are not yet legal citizens but who act as (and could become) such, and those who are citizens according to the law but not yet treated thus in practice,” which she attributes to Douglass in his Fifth of July speech (2017, 30).

for him, as she travels covertly through the night between plantations and forcefully accosts a plantation cook to ensure that her son is fed (1855/1987, 40-41, emphasis his).

Douglass advances a conception of American citizenship as a moral status forged by the enactment of commitments in the same way that he understands family relations to be forged. In describing his first organizing efforts at escape from slavery, Douglass remarks: “our meetings must have resembled, on a small scale, the meetings of revolutionary conspirators, in their primary condition” (1855/1987, 171). Here, Gooding-Williams observes, “Douglass suggests that, in acting to assert their rights of rebellion, he and his fellow conspirators imitated the founding fathers” (2009, 192). Through these meetings, Douglass and his co-conspirators commit themselves to organized resistance against tyranny and oppression. The enactment of this commitment through antislavery resistance itself generates a political right to engage in such resistance, because it forges bonds of solidarity among resisters in ways that shapes the normative foundation of the polity. This, for Douglass, is how American revolutionaries constituted themselves as citizens at the founding of the polity; it is likewise how enslaved and free Black people constitute themselves as citizens in what Douglass casts as the nation’s refounding.

Douglass applies this moral conception of citizenship to claim that American slaveholders themselves are committed to a right of rebellion for slaves. In the midst of recounting various forms of resistance by slaves on the plantation, Douglass states:

The slaveholder, kind or cruel, is a slaveholder still—the every hour violator of the just and inalienable rights of man; and he is, therefore every hour silently whetting the knife of vengeance for his own throat. He never lisps a syllable in commendation of the fathers of this republic, nor denounces any attempted oppression of himself, without

inviting the knife to his own throat, and asserting the rights of rebellion for his own slaves. (1855/1987, 165)

The right of rebellion Douglass has in mind here is plainly not a positive legal right that slaves possess. But Douglass is not referring (simply) to a revisionary natural right that slaves possess, either. We see that slaves possess this right of rebellion, Douglass argues, because of the *hypocrisy* of slaveholders, and white Americans generally: slaves have a rightful claim to rebel because white Americans act in ways that fail to reflect the fundamental values of the polity. Slaves possess a right of rebellion in virtue of the American polity's fundamental values. If Douglass were referring to a right to break with the polity, he could appeal to moral values without making reference to American hypocrisy and political values. The right of rebellion is thus a claim slaves have on the American polity, because it is a right grounded in the polity's own values.¹³ Douglass's right of rebellion empowers slaves— as well as free Black Americans— to resist the tyranny and oppression to which they are subjected as members of the polity. It a right that empowers one to participate in the politics of polity, in the same sense that the right to vote empowers.

Such rights derive, on Douglass's view, from social bonds forged by enacting a commitment to the polity's fundamental values. Slaveholders (inadvertently) assert slaves' rights of rebellion by affirming that the fundamental values of the American polity involve a commitment to resist tyranny and oppression. The value to resist tyranny and oppression is fundamental in the sense that enacting the principle is to enact a commitment to the polity in a way that renders one a citizen. Enslaved and free Black people in the US, Douglass maintains,

13 This is not to say that Douglass denies that slaves have a right of rebellion in the reversionary sense; it is only to say that Douglass *also* thinks that enslaved and free Black people in the US have a claim to participate in American politics through rebellion. Thanks to Yarran Hominh for helpful discussion on this point.

enact this commitment ubiquitously; the rights of rebellion passage itself is situated between Douglass's accounts of how he helped organize a covert Sabbath school on the Freeland plantation to teach other slaves to read, and how he and other central members of this school went on to organize an (ultimately unsuccessful) run-away plot. The diverse modes of resistance that enslaved and free Black Americans engage in enact this citizenship-constituting commitment; as Hooker observes: "By connecting the law-breaking of fugitive slaves to the United States's founding, Douglass can be read as suggesting that revolutionary acts of resistance are constitutive to the praxis of democratic citizenship" (2017, 32). In engaging in antislavery resistance, Douglass understands enslaved and free Black people in the US as imitating the founders by enacting their own commitment to resist tyranny and oppression; in so doing Black Americans constitute themselves as American citizens with political rights like that to rebel against tyranny and oppression.¹⁴

It is worth emphasizing that Douglass's view of the American founders in (for instance) the Fifth of July speech is pointedly ambivalent. While he lauds the founders' commitment to resist tyranny and oppression, he of course also notes that "[t]he point from which I am compelled to view them is not, certainly, the most favorable" (1852/1999, 192). Douglass plainly does not think a commitment to resist tyranny and oppression is the only principle guiding the political practices of the American polity. The narrative of American decline Douglass deploys in the Fifth of July and other contemporary writings clearly implies that other oppressive commitments undermine the realization of a principle of anti-oppression (Gooding-Williams

14 It is worth noting that there is a close connection between the kind of activity that constitutes one as a citizen in the moral sense, and (at least some) core rights of citizenship in the legal sense. Resistance against tyranny and oppression, for instance, constitutes American citizenship on Douglass's view, and a right to engage in such resistance is attached to citizenship-status.

2009, 193-94). But this is precisely why, for Douglass, antislavery resistance serves a central role in re forging the American polity. To the extent that American political practices have become detached from a commitment to resist tyranny and oppression, Douglass thinks that antislavery resistance— and especially varieties of resistance like declaration— will help to recenter a commitment to resist tyranny and oppression as a fundamental principle of the polity, and help to bring American political practices into accord with this principle.

In essence, just as the American founders render themselves citizens by forging a polity through the enactment of a commitment to resist tyranny and oppression, enslaved and free Black people render themselves citizens by re forging the same polity through the enactment of a commitment to resist tyranny and oppression. For Douglass, plantation politics— and Black-led abolitionist politics more generally— is a politics of antislavery resistance through which slaves render themselves citizens with a rightful claim to the political practices of the polity. The emancipatory potential of Douglass’s picture of American politics is that citizenship, in its fundamental moral sense, is a status that we secure for ourselves by acting in concert with others, as we do in collective efforts to resist tyranny and oppression.

But while Douglass thinks that this conception of citizenship as a moral status constituted by enacting a commitment to resist tyranny and oppression is built into American political culture, he does not think that simply articulating it will bring white Americans to consciously recognize enslaved and free Black Americans as fellow citizens. Rather, the task is to reshape the social and political practices of Americans to reflect the fact that Black Americans already possess standing as citizens in the moral sense, and thus must be extended the rights of the citizen in the legal sense.

III. Two Examples of Declaration

Declaration is one mode of political action through which Douglass believes this task-- to bring the polity to acknowledge Black Americans as citizens-- can be achieved. I will outline two examples of declaration in *My Bondage and My Freedom*. The first is Douglass's "What to the Slave is the Fourth of July?" speech. The second is Douglass's fight with the 'slavebreaker' Edward Covey.

Declaration helps promote the political standing of enslaved and free Black people in the US in two ways. First, when performed by agents subject to oppression, declaration is a form of citizenship-constituting resistance. Such acts of declaration are thus themselves enactments of a commitment to resist tyranny and oppression. By enacting a commitment to resist tyranny and oppression in a polity where such resistance is a fundamental principle, declaration helps constitute and maintain the declarer's standing as a citizen.¹⁵ This is one way in which declaration is continuous with other forms of antislavery resistance. But, second, declaration calls attention to itself as action that constitutes and maintains the declarer as a citizen. In this way declaration contrasts with other, covert forms of antislavery resistance. By calling attention to itself in this way, declaration compels acknowledgment of the declarer as a citizen: forcefully confronted with a citizenship-constituting act, an audience responds to the declarer as constituting herself as a citizen.¹⁶ It is this characteristic, moreover, that articulates the potential

15 In a polity where resistance against tyranny and oppression is the fundamental principle, it is not possible for oppressors to declare their standing. No form of political action an oppressor engages in (qua oppressor) will qualify as the enactment of a commitment to resist tyranny and oppression. But, in a polity with different fundamental principles, it is conceivable that oppressors could declare their standing as citizens through the enactment of a commitment to oppressive principles. Indeed, one could argue that oppressors (qua oppressors) can declare their standing as citizens in the American polity by enacting other, oppressive principles fundamental to the polity. Since our focus is on the role of declaration in Douglass's antislavery politics, and Douglass doesn't take up this question directly, I won't pursue the point further here.

16 Strictly, no single action constitutes one as a citizen, on the view I ascribe to Douglass. Citizenship is a status constituted by a pattern of action that enacts a commitment to a polity. But acts of declaration are acts that forcefully manifest the commitment relevant to citizenship, and in this way confront an audience with the declarer's standing as a citizen.

of declaration to contribute to the reforging of the polity. Declaration not only helps constitute one's political standing as a citizen, but also compels acknowledgment of such standing by the wider polity, and in so doing reorganizes the polity's self-conception of its fundamental principles.

A. Fifth of July Speech

On July 5, 1852, Douglass gives a 'Fourth of July Oration' at the invitation of the Rochester Ladies' Anti-Slavery Society. He observes that he has been invited to speak about American independence. But while Douglass pays (pointedly ambivalent) homage to the American Founders, he uses the podium to decry American hypocrisy and slavery:

I do not hesitate to declare, with all my soul, that the character and conduct of this nation never looked blacker to me than on this 4th of July! Whether we turn to the declarations of the past, or to the professions of the present, the conduct of the nation seems equally hideous and revolting. America is false to the past, false to the present, and solemnly binds herself to be false to the future. (1855/1987, 285).

What, to the American slave, is your 4th of July? I answer, a day that reveals to him, more than all other days in the year, the gross injustice and cruelty to which he is the constant victim. (1855/1987, 288)

As Douglass shames his audience for asking him to celebrate this day, he notes that some would say he should "argue more, and denounce less" in order to promote the aims of antislavery effectively. Douglass refuses to do so: "But, I submit, where all is plain there is nothing to be argued" (1855/1987, 286). The moral and political standing of the enslaved is not something "to be settled by the rules of logic and argumentation," for "[t]he time for such argument has

passed.” Instead, what is needed is a tone of “scorching irony” (1855/1987, 287).

The biting, ironic tone of Douglass’s speech expresses a refusal to argue over his political (and moral) standing in the polity.¹⁷ Douglass disrupts the trajectory of reasonable political discourse; he will not weigh the arguments on each side of the ‘debate’ concerning his moral and political standing. At core, Douglass’s use of irony and refusal in the speech cast his claim to citizenship as at the same time “felicitous” but not grounded in “authorized procedures or norms for representing the popular voice” (Frank 2010, 210). This paradoxically felicitous but unauthorized claim to citizenship, in Frank’s terminology, stages a dissensus that unsettles his audience’s assumptions about the boundary and character of their political community (2010, 209-15).

It is precisely through this staging of dissensus that Douglass enacts his standing as a citizen in a way that compels his audience to acknowledge it. In advancing a felicitous but unauthorized claim to citizenship, Douglass is contesting exclusionary understandings of American citizenship that reinforce slavery and white supremacy. In so doing, Douglass enacts a commitment to resist tyranny and oppression; the staging of dissensus itself constitutes Douglass’s standing as a citizen— or, more precisely, is part of a pattern of activity through which Douglass continually reconstitutes his standing as a citizen.

Moreover, Douglass’s staging of dissensus through forceful refusal and biting irony alters the way in which his audience relates to his speech: in virtue of this conflictual stance through which Douglass enacts and manifests his citizenship, his audience is brought to see the speech

17 It is tempting to discount Douglass’s refusal to argue in the Fifth of July speech— after all, Douglass offers a number of arguments throughout this section of the speech. But it’s important to be attuned to the specific points Douglass argues for: he does provide a series of arguments to establish that is absurd to ask him to justify his moral and political standing, but he does not argue for his standing directly.

itself as an *act* of citizenship-constituting resistance, instead of mining it for claims to weigh in making up their minds about Douglass's claim to citizenship. This shift in orientation, from seeing Douglass's speech as in the first place an enumeration of claims relevant to public deliberation to a series of citizenship-constituting actions, bears on other modes of rhetorical engagement that Douglass enacts in his speech. In particular, Douglass does engage in reasonable argument on a variety of points, including some closely connected to his moral and political standing. For instance, in a passage we'll consider below, Douglass argues that the legal code of Virginia, which imposes the death penalty on Black people for 72 crimes, implicitly acknowledges their standing as persons bearing moral responsibility. But, importantly, in arguments like this Douglass does not move from this point to the conclusion that enslaved and free Black people are persons— Douglass moves to the conclusion that the moral standing of Black persons is not genuinely contested: "The manhood of the slave is conceded." For Douglass, the antebellum legal code of Virginia is not evidence that Black people are persons— let us not confer such dignity upon a slave code— it is instead evidence that there is no good-faith debate to be had over the matter. When we situate these arguments in the context of a reorientation towards the speech as series of acts, rather than a list of propositions, we see the arguments Douglass advances as enactments of his political standing. The content of these arguments— that there is no interlocutor on the question of Douglass's moral and political standing worthy of reasonable engagement— helps redirect his audience's orientation toward the speech as an enactment of, rather than reasonable argument for, Douglass's standing as a citizen. Douglass thereby transforms his audience's understanding of what it is to hear a claim to fellow-membership. Such claims are not assertions to be weighed on the basis of evidence and deliberation; they are enactments of one's political standing that compel an audience's

acknowledgment.

In the Fifth of July speech, Douglass aims to crystalize in his audience an understanding of citizenship which he thinks will be plausible and indeed compelling to them. One might worry that Douglass isn't licensed in taking this potential for a shared understanding of citizenship with audience for granted; in other words, that Douglass's claim to citizenship will strike his audience as simply unauthorized and infelicitous.¹⁸ Douglass, I think, would address this worry in two steps. First, Douglass would maintain that his audience in fact possesses his formal understanding of citizenship as constituted by an enacted commitment to the fundamental principles of a polity. One way in which we come to see others as members of our community is by seeing them contribute in important ways to our community. The fundamental principles of our polity determine what sorts of contributions are important. Douglass would say: Reflect carefully on your experience and you will realize that you see those who contribute to your community in ways that reflect your polity's fundamental principles as citizens. This is just to say that, on reflection, we see those who enact commitments to the principles of the polity as citizens. Declaration directs an audience's attention to this way in which we experience others as fellow citizens.¹⁹ But, as I will argue, in directing its audience's attention in this way declaration transforms this conception of citizenship from simply intelligible to the primary way in which members of a polity understand one another as members of a shared political community.

Second, Douglass would argue that his audience shares his specific conception of

18 Thanks to Krupa Patel for raising this worry.

19 To be clear, it is not that one's perception of another as a citizen *constitutes* the latter's standing as a citizen. One perceives a normative status as something constituted independently of one's perception of the status. It is in this sense that my standing as a citizen is not up to you, or the wider polity in which I am situated.

American citizenship as constituted by an enacted commitment to resist tyranny and oppression, insofar as they commend the founders. Take the passage on slaves' rights of rebellion' above. Slaveholders do in fact commend the founders. In so doing, they affirm slaves' right of rebellion because, Douglass maintains in this speech, the founders really were committed to resisting tyranny and oppression (even if they espoused other oppressive commitments at the same time). So Douglass thinks the choice for his audience is between commending the founders, and thus accepting his view of the fundamental principle of the American polity, or condemning the founders and rejecting his view.

What Douglass does in the Fifth of July speech, then, is draw on these aspects of his audience's everyday political life in order to, through a staging of dissensus that enacts a commitment to resist tyranny and oppression, reforge them into a forceful manifestation of his standing as a fellow citizen.

B. The Fight with Covey

In August 1834, Douglass falls ill while processing wheat on the plantation of the 'slavebreaker' Edward Covey.²⁰ Covey, in response, beats Douglass badly; Douglass flees to his owner's plantation (who had conscripted Douglass out to Covey), asking that he be hired out elsewhere. Douglass's owner, however, instructs him to return to Covey's plantation the following day (1855/1987, 138-43).

After returning to Covey's plantation, Douglass is eventually ambushed by Covey while working in the stables. Douglass, in response, springs into resistance, "remember[ing] my pledge to *stand up in my own defense*," which Douglass made to himself while returning to Covey's

²⁰ Slaveowners in eastern Maryland would hire out "disobedient" slaves to Covey cheaply, and in exchange he would discipline them through violent and brutal means.

plantation. Ultimately, after a two hour (!) struggle, Covey gives up on his attack, without having “whipped me [Douglass] at all” (1855/1987, 151). Douglass asserts that his fight with Covey “was the end of the brutification to which slavery had subjected me” (1855/1987, 152).

Gooding-Williams characterizes Douglass’s fight with Covey as Douglass’s “first declaration of independence” (2009, 176). Douglass presents his fight with Covey as “the beginning of a revolution that aims to reconstitute the American nation” paralleling the role of the Declaration of Independence in (a certain mythology of) the American Revolution (Gooding-Williams 2009, 180). In the fight with Covey, as through the Declaration of Independence, Douglass secures a certain (and certainly fragile) degree of autonomy from a tyrant, altering the way in which Covey comports himself in relation to Douglass. The fight with Covey thus gives us a sense of what sort of acknowledgment declaration compels, and how it compels such acknowledgment.

Important for our purposes, Douglass describes his experience in standing up for his own defense “as though [Covey and I] stood as equals before the law” (1855/1987, 149). Douglass articulates his own forceful resistance as constituting not only an act of self-defense, but also an expression of a *rightful claim* to self-defense when attacked by another. Douglass sees his resistance as expressing a rightful claim to self-defense, I claim, because he sees it as enacting his political standing as a citizen. In fighting back against Covey, Douglass is not only avoiding physical harm, but “repelling the unjust and cruel aggressions of a tyrant” (1855/1987, 151). Douglass thus sees himself as engaged in resistance against tyranny and oppression, and thereby a citizen with equal standing before the law, which he asserts by enacting a right to self-defense.

Douglass’s resistance, moreover, brings about a long term change in his relationship with Covey on the plantation. Whereas before the fight, Douglass observes that he “remained with Covey for one year, (I cannot say I *lived* with him),” after the fight Douglass remarks that he

“lived with Covey,” for Covey “never again laid on me the weight of his finger in anger” (1855/1987, 133, 151, emphasis his). Douglass, I claim, interprets this change in Covey’s behavior as acknowledgment of Douglass’s right to self-defense, and thereby (partial) acknowledgment of his political standing as a citizen.²¹ Covey acknowledges Douglass insofar as after the fight, Douglass comes to live with Covey. Of course, this also implies that acknowledgment of one’s standing as a citizen does not necessarily consist in consciously affirmed recognition of this standing. Douglass notes that Covey never attacks him again, nor calls the authorities to detain Douglass, at least in part because Covey worries that talk about the fight would harm his reputation as a ‘slavebreaker’ (1855/1987, 152). Covey’s acknowledgment is manifest in his behavior, not in his consciously affirmed attitudes. But because Douglass emphasizes the change in his relationship with Covey, however— from remaining to living with— he clearly takes this change in Covey’s behavior to have some significance.

The fight with Covey is an instance of political resistance, as it enacts Douglass’s standing as a citizen with a right to self-defense. The fight is an act of declaration because it compels acknowledgment of Douglass’s standing as a citizen: it alters Douglass’s relationship with Covey insofar as the latter refrains from laying a finger on Douglass in anger again, thereby comporting himself in a manner that reflects Douglass’s right to self-defense.

IV. Compelling Acknowledgment

At this point we’ve seen how two examples of declaration— Douglass’s Fifth of July speech and his fight with Covey— establish Douglass’s standing as a citizen: they are enactments of a commitment to resist tyranny and oppression which compels an audience to acknowledge them

²¹ The acknowledgment that Douglass secures from Covey is plainly partial, as Covey continues to ‘own’ Douglass and exploit his labor.

as such. In this section, I spell out the sense of ‘acknowledgment’ that declaration compels, and what it means for declaration to forcefully manifest one’s standing as a citizen.

Acknowledgment, in the sense I attribute to Douglass, consists in responsiveness: I acknowledge someone (e.g., a fellow citizen) or something (e.g., the external world) by acting in some way that responds to her or it (Cavell 1969a, 1969b, 1979; Markell 2003). Responsiveness is a capacious category: I respond to you as a citizen, for instance, by acting in some way or another in relation to you qua fellow citizen. Moreover, responsiveness need not involve conscious avowal of what is being acknowledged, as Douglass’s depiction of Covey illustrates. Douglass does not attribute to Covey the thought ‘Douglass is a fellow American citizen,’ but nevertheless takes the change in Covey’s behavior to be meaningful for the purposes of antislavery politics. In other words, I acknowledge you as a citizen by treating you as a citizen, well or poorly, and whether or not I consciously cognize it as such.

Douglass articulates this conception of acknowledgment as responsiveness in a passage in his Fifth of July speech, in connection with the antebellum legal code of Virginia:

The slaveholders themselves acknowledge [that the slave is a man] in the enactment of laws for their government. They acknowledge it when they punish disobedience on the part of the slave. There are seventy-two crimes in the state of Virginia which, if committed by a black man... subject him to the punishment of death; while only two of these same crimes will subject a white man to the like punishment. What is this but the acknowledgment that the slave is a moral, intellectual, and responsible being.

(1855/1987, 286)

Douglass argues that the legal code of Virginia, in subjecting slaves to punishment, acknowledges slaves as “moral, intellectual, and responsible” beings. Implied in Douglass’s

remarks is a distinction between punishment and the mere infliction of suffering: punishment responds to (actual or perceived) violations of one's moral responsibility. An act of punishment is a way of responding to the moral responsibility, and thus moral standing, of the person subject to punishment.²²

To say that an action responds to the normative standing of another does not mean that the action necessarily responds to her normative standing rightly. Douglass is plainly not claiming that the punishments to which Black people in antebellum Virginia are subjected appropriately reflect the responsibility they bear as moral agents. But even inappropriate punishment responds—wrongly—to the moral standing of the subject of punishment. It is in virtue of this responsiveness that an action acknowledges the normative status possessed by the target of the action.

The fact that Douglass characterizes something as oppressive as the antebellum legal code of Virginia as acknowledging the moral standing of slaves, while still seeking to induce acknowledgment in his own audiences, implies that he must distinguish between better and worse instances of acknowledgment. To the this end, we can evaluatively distinguish cases of acknowledgment as complete or incomplete (Cavell 1969b). Acknowledgment of someone as possessing a particular normative status (e.g., citizenship) is complete when it satisfies two conditions: the *respect condition* and the *self-conscious* condition.

My acknowledgment of you satisfies the respect condition when the way in which I respond to you appropriately reflects (i.e., respects) your normative standing. For instance, my acknowledgment of you as a citizen satisfies the respect condition when I treat you as a citizen

22 Note that here we are discussing moral standing in order to elucidate Douglass's conception of acknowledgment, as Douglass discusses acknowledgment explicitly in connection with moral standing in this passage.

ought to be treated— say, in accord with the rights of the citizen.

My acknowledgment of you satisfies the self-conscious condition when I recognize the way in which I act in response to you as a reflection of your normative standing. For instance, my acknowledgment of you as a citizen satisfies the self-conscious condition only if I recognize that I am treating you as citizen ought to be treated (or at least how I think a citizen ought to be treated).

If the way in which I respond to is either disrespectful or not self-conscious, then my acknowledgment of you is incomplete. The legal code of Virginia is an instance of incomplete acknowledgment in part because the way it responds to the moral standing of slaves is radically disrespectful— it fails the respect condition. Covey’s acknowledgment of Douglass is incomplete in part because Covey himself does not recognize it as a response to Douglass’s standing as a fellow citizen— it fails the self-conscious condition.²³

While complete— that is, self-consciously respectful— acknowledgment captures a notably more desirable mode of social and political relation than incomplete— that is, not self-conscious or disrespectful— acknowledgment, incomplete acknowledgment nevertheless plays an important role in Douglass’s emancipatory politics. Douglass observes in *Bondage* that changes in patterns of behavior ultimately affect changes in public opinion: “[p]ublic opinion seldom differs very widely from public practice” (1855/1987, 45). Instances of incomplete acknowledgment are themselves catalysts for complete acknowledgment, and other substantial changes in public opinion, because coming to incomplete acknowledgment involves changes in patterns of practice in daily social life that ultimately shape changes in public opinion.

²³ Of course, for both of these examples we can also identify ways in which the other condition of complete acknowledgment is violated.

Declaration induces acknowledgment of the declarer’s normative standing by *manifesting* that standing before an audience. Douglass describes the manifestation of normative standing (e.g., personhood, citizenship) in terms of evincing *dignity*. In his reflections on his fight with Covey, Douglass asserts that “[a] man without force, is without the essential dignity of humanity” (1855/1987, 151). Douglass’s assertion can appear puzzling, if one thinks of dignity as an intrinsic marker of one’s humanity. Dignity, on such an understanding, is exactly the sort of thing that we cannot lack. Because Douglass suggests one can lack dignity— in particular, if she is without force— Douglass must be referring to a different normative characteristic of agents. Gooding-Williams, in his reading of this passage, observes that dignity is important for Douglass:

not because a human being cannot be a human being without it, but because he cannot induce respect without it—either the respect of others or self-respect. In short, he cannot achieve his humanity in the eyes of others or in his own eyes. The essential dignity of humanity is an apparent, manifest dignity that human beings require—that all the members of humanity require—to acknowledge one another as human. (2009, 181).²⁴

What dignity refers to, for Douglass, is the way in which we manifest the fact that we are moral persons and fellow citizens in ways that induce others to act in ways that acknowledge us as such. Declaration is one mode of action through which we evince dignity in this sense.

You bring me to acknowledge you as a citizen by acting in ways that manifest your citizenship. What it is for someone to declare her citizenship is to make it manifest by enacting a commitment to the fundamental principles of the polity before an audience. Douglass, for

24 Gooding-Williams here elides the distinction drawn above between inducing respect and acknowledgment: as we see in Douglass’s remarks concerning Virginia’s antebellum legal code, one can acknowledge another in disrespectful ways. Thanks for José Medina and Akeel Bilgrami for helpful discussion on this point.

instance, manifests his citizenship before his audience in the Fifth of July speech by declaiming slavery and white supremacy; he manifests his citizenship in the fight with Covey by overpowering a tyrant. The political dignity that Douglass evinces in these episodes consists, at core, in his unambiguous enactment of a commitment to resist tyranny and oppression.²⁵

Declaration is a distinctively effective means of inducing acknowledgment because it *forcefully* manifests the declarer's citizenship. In the claim cited above, Douglass notes that dignity depends on the exercise of force. Only through the exercise of force, on Douglass's picture, can someone ensure that her audience responds to her as a fellow citizen (or moral person). Acts of declaration *compel* acknowledgment because they are *forceful*: by confronting an audience with his citizenship enacted, Douglass makes his audience respond—consciously or not, respectfully or disrespectfully—to him as a fellow citizen.

It's tempting to think that Douglass conceives of force as physical power or violence, and perhaps forms of rhetoric that echo such power and violence. But the forcefulness of declaration need not be understood narrowly in terms of an elite machismo. The forcefulness of declaration precludes *neutral avoidance*. Typically, I acknowledge you by acting in response your manifested dignity—responsiveness is a matter of doing something. This implies that when I fail to act, I fail to acknowledge you: my lack of action is a lack of responsiveness—it is neutral avoidance.

Acts of declaration are forceful in the sense that they render even such avoidance a mode of responsiveness. Douglass's Fifth of July audience acknowledges Douglass by listening to his

²⁵ Here I refer to *political* dignity because we are concerned with the aspect of Douglass's resistance that manifests his standing as an American citizen. This does not compete with an account of the *moral* dignity of Douglass's resistance, which concerns how Douglass's speech and fight manifest his moral personhood for his audience to acknowledge. I focus here on the political dignity Douglass's resistance evinces in order to capture its role in his post-Garrisonian antislavery politics.

speech, receiving Douglass's argument and invective. Covey similarly acknowledges Douglass after the fight by refraining from laying a finger on him in anger. Covey's acknowledgment consists precisely in what he *does not* do to Douglass after the fight. The forcefulness of declaration transforms an audience's inaction into a mode of responsiveness to the declarer's manifested standing: the fact that Douglass is a citizen (and person) cannot be ignored by his audiences in these cases.²⁶

If we think of force as precluding neutral avoidance— as preventing an audience from ignoring the manifestation of a person's normative standing— then we need not characterize declaration as a mode of political action enacted by a 'manly' elite. What makes declarations distinctively effective in altering an audience's understanding of the boundaries of their political community is this capacity to transform inaction into responsiveness, and thereby induce acknowledgment of persons previously marginalized in a polity. While, in the particular contexts Douglass finds himself, physical violence and forceful rhetoric are particularly apt ways of making an audience's inaction a mode of responsiveness, we need not assume that these varieties of action are the only ways to achieve forcefulness in this sense— there are many ways in which a confrontation with an audience can be effected.

At this stage, one may still worry that the democratic character of declaration is substantially constrained. Douglass's paradigmatic examples of declaration—his fight with Covey and Fifth of July speech— easily strike us as exceptional moments of antislavery resistance. The exceptional character of these episodes derives in part from the fact that Douglass exercises forms of physical and rhetorical force, in overpowering a slaveholder and seizing the

²⁶ Now, we might want to insist that any case of inaction is necessarily an instance of *incomplete* acknowledgment. But even if this is right, remember that Douglass thinks incomplete acknowledgment helps to ultimately generate complete acknowledgment and other changes in public attitudes.

attention of an audience, that are not obviously embodied in the many examples of everyday antislavery resistance that Douglass recounts in *Bondage*. Indeed, in as much as these acts compel acknowledgment by, in Frank's phrasing, staging dissensus, one might worry that the very idea of staging might seem to imply that some and not others are well-situated to take the stage— that the sphere of political life in which declaration is enacted is inevitably bounded and exclusive.

But once we see that the engine of declaration is its power to effect acknowledgment—to demand and induce responsiveness to a forcefully manifestation of one's normative standing—we are in a position to characterize many moments of antislavery resistance that Douglass recounts in *Bondage* as instances of acknowledgment. Nelly forcefully resists and scars an overseer assaulting her before her children and the young Douglass; Denby breaks from the attack of an overseer, plant himself in the middle of a creek, and refuses to return at the order of his attacker; Bill and Caroline refuse to obey Covey's orders to assist in restraining Douglass during their fight, Bill declaring to Douglass "My God! Frederick, I aint goin' to tech ye" (1855/1987, 61-63, 78-79, 150-51). Nelly, Denby, Bill, and Caroline confront slaveholders with resistance and refusal in ways that compel these audiences to respond.²⁷

At the same time, these examples also illustrate the limits of declaration's efficacy securing the concrete aims of emancipatory politics. The acknowledgment that Nelly, Denby, and Caroline induce is unequivocally horrific: Nelly and Caroline are viciously beaten for their

²⁷ We should note the two-fold audience in each of these episodes. In each case, the declarer compels a slaveholder to respond (violently) to their resistance and refusal. But in each case the declarer also resists and refuses before other slaves, who witness and affirm the refusal—a witnessing and affirmation that Douglass reproduces in recounting these episodes in his autobiography. With respect to the first audience in each case, incomplete acknowledgment is at issue; with respect to the second audience, complete acknowledgment is at least a reasonable aim.

resistance, and Denby is shot dead. No single act of declaration guarantees emancipation for anyone, and cost one bears for inducing acknowledgment of her standing can be supremely
grave.²⁸

The distinctive emancipatory potential of declaration, then, depends on two points. First, no one act of declaration, on Douglass's view, suffices on its own to address the trial of the enslaved. Instead, Douglass sees emancipatory potential in a pattern of enslaved and free Black Americans forcefully manifesting their citizenship in ways that reshape a polity's practices over time. This is inevitably a long-term emancipatory project to which particular acts of declaration contribute.

Second, Douglass believes—I think reasonably—that an extended program of forceful manifestation of citizenship that induces acknowledgment bears emancipatory potential because of the distinctive political epistemology that it invokes, and, through repeated enactment, inculcates in its audience. Declaration's refusal to convince and persuade works to reorient its audience towards a conception of citizenship as a status that is secured through the enactment of the polity's fundamental commitments; this reorientation, which is embodied in the practical responsiveness of acknowledgment, refigures the way in which we understand one another as members of a shared political community. On declaration's political epistemology of acknowledgment, we understand one another as members of a shared political community by comporting ourselves in ways that reflect this fact. In the next section, I explain why a political epistemology of acknowledgment bears distinctive emancipatory potential, in contrast to a position on which citizenship is in the first place a status conferred by a polity.

28 I thank Emma Rodman for helpful discussion on the scope and limits of declarations emancipatory efficacy.

V. A Political Epistemology of Acknowledgment

Through declaration, Douglass aims to transform not only the American polity's understanding of who its members are, but also its political epistemology—its account of how we understand one another as members of a shared political community. Declaration contests a tempting political epistemology of political citizenship, which consists in two connected claims. First, on the picture Douglass contests, one's standing as a citizen is *conferred* by the wider polity. Other citizens of the polity know that I am a citizen because they make me a citizen. Second, the wider polity confers citizenship upon someone because they judge her to possess the capacities of the citizen. This judgment consists in an *inference* from particular actions or traits that are taken as indirect evidence that a person possess the capacities requisite for the conferral of citizenship. The epistemic task for emancipatory politics, on a political epistemology of inference, is to provide evidence that members of a marginalized group possess marks and features requisite for citizenship, in order to persuade the polity to confer citizenship.²⁹

Black abolitionists in the 1850s, including Douglass, contest this political epistemology of citizenship because it is unsuitable to the aims of emancipatory politics, and is indeed implicated in the maintenance of pro-slavery and white supremacist ideology. Martin Delany, a Black abolitionist and contemporary of Douglass, targets this epistemology of citizenship in his 1852 pamphlet, *The Condition, Elevation, Emigration, and Destiny of the Colored People of the United States*. Delany focuses on this 'political' conception of citizenship, which he contrasts with a 'natural' birthright conception of citizenship:

The legitimate requirement, politically considered, necessary to the justifiable claims

²⁹ Compare with Markell's characterization of the role of knowledge in politics of recognition: "struggles for recognition [are] attempts to secure forms of respect and esteem that are grounded in, and expressive of, the accurate knowledge of the particular identities borne by people and social groups" (2003, 39).

for protection and full enjoyment of all the rights and privileges of an unqualified freeman, in all democratic countries is, that each person so endowed, shall have made contributions and investments in the country. (1852/2014, 48)

On the picture Delany sketches, a social group/class justifies their claim to citizenship by offering evidence that they as a class have made ‘contributions and investments in the country,’ and thereby demonstrate that their members possess the capacity (are ‘so endowed’) as to contribute to the polity. Where the evidence is sufficient, the wider polity ought to confer citizenship upon members of the class.

In *Condition*, Delany goes on to show that this model for promoting one’s claim to citizenship is hopelessly flawed in the American case: enslaved and free Black Americans have satisfied the ‘contribution and investment’ criterion according to any reasonable standard (Delany takes nearly 100 pages of a 200 page pamphlet to demonstrate this), so that:

If such evidence of industry and interest, as has been exhibited in the various chapters on the different pursuits and engagements of colored Americans, do not entitle them to equal rights and privileges in our common country, then indeed, is there nothing to justify the claims of any portion of the American people to the common inheritance of Liberty. (1852/2014, 145)

But, Delany goes on to show, such evidence has not sufficed to vindicate the claim of enslaved and free Black people in the US to citizenship, in the eyes of the wider white polity; Delany demonstrates this by quoting the Fugitive Slave Act of 1850 in full in the pamphlet. Instead, Delany argues, systems of oppression in America have subjected enslaved and free Black people in the US to a “corruption of blood.” This corruption of blood infects the wider polity’s inference from marks and features to the possession of the capacities of the citizen. This is for two reasons.

First, systems of oppression like that enacted by the Fugitive Slave Act impede those subject to them from exercising the capacities at issue, thereby limiting the amount of evidence the wider polity can infer a rightful claim to citizenship on the basis of. Second, systems of oppression present those subject to them as morally and politically inferior to the wider polity, and directly implicate the wider polity in treating the oppressed as inferior. To the extent that the wider polity sees and treats those subject to oppression as inferior, on Delany's account, they will inevitably judge that the oppressed lack the capacities of the citizen, no matter what contrary evidence is put before them. The wider polity will thus never (or never reliably) judge an oppressed class to have a rightful claim to citizenship, and thus will not confer such status upon members of the class. Delany concludes that, since any form of political justification for citizenship must appeal to marks-and-features evidence in this way, interventions by abolitionists in American public discourse to establish the political standing of enslaved and free Black people are hopeless. Delany thus goes on in the pamphlet to advocate for emigrationism as an alternative, more viable, antislavery strategy.³⁰

We should read Douglass's refusal to argue reasonably against pro-slavery and white supremacist ideology in the Fifth of July speech as an endorsement of Delany's critique of 'political' justifications for citizenship. In refusing to argue reasonably, Douglass rejects demands to marshal marks-and-features evidence to justify his claim to political (and moral) standing in the American polity. In so doing Douglass also rejects a picture on which his political

30 I develop this critique in (Yaure 2018). Note that the critique I attribute to Delany is compatible with the more straightforward claim that the wider polity will not grant political privileges to an oppressed class because it is in their (actual or perceived) interest not to do so. The criticism I attribute to Delany adds that the very logic of a marks-and-features justification for citizenship ensure that even if the privileged class were to declaim their self-interest, they would nevertheless fail to confer citizenship upon the oppressed. In this way, the logic of marks and features conceptions of citizenship reinforces oppressive ideology.

(and moral) standing is conferred by the wider polity: he will not marshal for his audience marks-and-features evidence in defense of his standing because his standing is not theirs to confer.

But unlike Delany, Douglass does not advocate for abolitionists to withdraw from the American political sphere. Instead, through the Fifth of July speech itself, Douglass models declaration as an alternative mode of intervention to reasonable argument in public discourse. Douglass therefore must think (or at least think it plausible) that declaration, in contrast to reasonable argument, is a potentially productive form of political argument for antislavery in American public discourse. Part of the reason Douglass thinks this, I claim, is that declaration articulates an alternative conception of how we relate epistemically to the political standing of those around us. Declaration presents citizenship as a status an audience acknowledges through confrontation with its enactment.

This might, at first pass, look like a rejection of a political epistemology: rather than promoting knowledge or understanding of persons' claims to citizenship, declaration cracks heads in order to induce behavior and beliefs (i.e. in declaration we're in the business of causes rather than justifications). But in fact, I think, acknowledgment points to a radically different form of epistemic relation to normative statuses than the marks-and-features model. Normative statuses like citizenship, on this picture, are themselves directly manifest to us in the world. In enacting a commitment to resist tyranny and oppression and directing an audience's attention to it, Douglass's declarations do not provide evidence justifying his claim to citizenship; rather, Douglass's standing as a citizen is directly manifest in these declarations. This is because the enacted commitment to resist tyranny and oppression just is what American citizenship consists in (given Douglass's interpretation of the fundamental principles of the American polity). Thus,

since one's standing as a citizen consists in the enactment of commitments, it is not up to the wider polity to confer, or withhold, standing. The role of the audience of declaration, in this regard, is perceptive rather than constructive— the audience acknowledges, rather than confers, standing. One acknowledges a normative status directly manifest in the world through the ways in which one comports oneself in the world. My comprehension of the normative status of another cashes out in terms of what I do, rather than in terms of what I (idly) believe.

This general epistemic model— of truths/facts/features of the world directly accessible to agents— is an instance of the view that Alice Crary calls a “wider conception of objectivity” (2018). On the wider conception of objectivity, normative values, traditionally circumscribed to a sphere of subjectivity removed from the world, are instead understood as elements of the world with which we make direct contact in actions that express them (McDowell 1979). But the wider conception of objectivity does not simply maintain that additional features of the world, like normative statuses, are further instances of properties discerned by natural science. Rather, the wider conception of objectivity articulates a broader understanding of what it is to be in the world (i.e., to be objective) and of what it is to perceive (i.e., see aright) what is in the world. Values are things we make sensible contact with— perceive— in the world (Bilgrami 2016). Our task in discerning the objective, on the wide conception of objectivity, is not to purge our perspective of those elements which in some sense depend on us (normative statuses make sense only insofar as there are others upon which the statuses impose requirements)— it is rather to properly attune ourselves to those elements of the world which in some sense depend on us. Acts of declaration help attune us to these features of the world by confronting us with their vivid manifestation in a way that induces acknowledgment.

It is worth noting that the sense of acknowledgment operative in this account of

declaration is broader than the claim that we directly see values in the world. Acknowledgment is a matter of perception in the sense that it is responsive to a status independently constituted in the world (i.e. a status constituted by the enactment of commitments). But acknowledgment does not only consist in the perception of enacted commitments. Acknowledgment consists in responsiveness: I acknowledge another as a citizen by comporting myself in ways that are responsive to her standing as citizen. In particular, I acknowledge another as a citizen in responding to the citizenship-constituting commitments that she enacts. In many cases, my responsiveness will involve, in part, seeing that another has enacted a commitment to the polity. I see the swings of your fists or reassurances to anxious comrades as efforts to resist tyranny and oppression. But the responsiveness that is constitutive of acknowledgment is not exhausted by perception in this sense. Acknowledgment is realized in what we do in relation to one another. I also acknowledge you as a citizen in joining you in a fight against an oppressor or in contributing to your organizing efforts. I may not be able to act effectively in these ways unless I also see you as engaged in resistance against oppression (or, more generally, see you as enacting some sort of commitment), but idle perception (i.e. perception that does not inform the way I act) strains the sense of ‘responsiveness’ at work in acknowledgment. Given that acknowledgment characterizes the way in which one understands others as bearers of normative status, my understanding of you as the bearer of a normative status, like citizenship, is realized in how I comport myself in relation to you.

If, with Douglass, we think of citizenship as a status constituted independently of a polity’s judgment, we have a model for reforging the boundaries of political community more inclusively, even under conditions of severe oppression. The epistemic task for an emancipatory politics, on a political epistemology of acknowledgment, is to induce responsiveness to the

citizenship of members of marginalized groups through intervention in the daily social interactions where acknowledgment arises. This requires that we think of citizenship in the first place as a mode of civic activism that forges bonds of solidarity between members of the polity. A viable emancipatory politics, on Douglass's view, draws on and reinforces this conception of citizenship by intervening in daily social life in ways that promote such activism and thereby induce acknowledgment. Declaration itself is one means by which this change in a polity's political epistemology is brought about: by effectively inducing acknowledgment in members of a polity, we change not only who they understand as their fellow members, but what they take such understanding to consist in.

VI. Conclusion

By way of conclusion, I want to return to the role of *My Bondage and My Freedom* itself in addressing the trial of the enslaved. At the start I noted that one of Douglass's purposes in penning *Bondage* is to address the trial of the enslaved by promoting acknowledgment of the political standing of enslaved and free Black people in the US. In light of the above account of declaration, I suggest that we can read Douglass's second autobiography itself as an instance of declaration.

The episodes of political resistance Douglass recounts in *Bondage* do not supply evidence from which the audience ought to infer that free and enslaved Black people have a rightful claim to American citizenship. *Bondage* consciously breaks with the conventions of earlier slave narratives, which are structured around the introduction of authenticating documents and written testimony from (typically white) abolitionists. This focus on a legalistic conception of justification, on which the veracity of the narrative must be established through authenticating evidence, crystallizes in a genre Robert Stepto calls the "authenticating narrative" (1991, 3-31).

The use of authenticating documents and written testimony for verification casts such narratives as bodies of facts for whites to draw on in public discourse about slavery.³¹

The authenticity of Douglass's autobiographies, by contrast, is exhibited through his exercise of agency, rather than the marks and features evidence of documents and testimony. Douglass's agency manifests not only in the episodes that he recounts in the narrative, but also in his articulation of the narrative itself. As Stepto puts it, Douglass enacts "preeminent authorial control [in] the presentation of his personal history" (1991, 25).³² Inasmuch as *Bondage* compels Douglass's audience to see him as the author of his own history— both in terms of his resistance against tyranny and oppression and in his presentation of his personal history (the penning and distribution of which is itself an act of resistance)— the autobiography itself induces acknowledgment of Douglass as political (and moral) equal.

However, *Bondage* is not only a declaration of Douglass's individual political (and moral) standing. *Bondage* is suffused with episodes of antislavery resistance executed by others. For instance, in examples discussed above: Nelly resists the attack of a brutal overseer; Denby's refuses to submit to a whipping (for which he is ultimately murdered); Bill and Caroline reject Covey's commands to assist him in his fight with Douglass. Through the political agency exhibited in these episodes, *Bondage* presents slaves as the authors of their own histories, which Douglass finds himself well-situated to report to other members of the polity. These episodes of resistance manifest slaves' political dignity, because they illustrate ways in which slaves enact a commitment to resist the tyranny and oppression of slaveholders. By evincing dignity in this

31 I owe this point to Emmalon Davis

32 Note that Stepto makes this claim about Douglass's first autobiography, *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, An American Slave*. I think, and believe Stepto would agree, that this claim also applies to Douglass's later autobiographies, including *My Bondage and My Freedom*.

way, the narrative episodes induce respect and acknowledgment of slaves' political standing as citizens. *Bondage* itself, thus, is an instance in which one can induce acknowledgment of the political standing of *others* through declaration, and in this way expand the polity's understanding of its membership and boundaries. Douglass's narrative confronts his readers with slaves' citizenship enacted. In so doing, Douglass seeks to reforge a more inclusive American polity on the basis of a political epistemology of acknowledgment.

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