



# On Plantation Politics: Citizenship and Antislavery Resistance in Douglass's *My Bondage and My Freedom*

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Accepted: 3 September 2022 / Published online: 26 November 2022  
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## Abstract

In republican political philosophy, citizenship is a status that is constituted by one's participation in the public life of the polity. In its traditional formulation, republican citizenship is an exclusionary and hierarchical way of defining a polity's membership, because the domain of activity that qualifies as participating in the polity's public life is highly restricted. I argue that Black American abolitionist Frederick Douglass advances a radically inclusive conception of republican citizenship by articulating a deeply capacious account of what it means to participate in the public life of the polity. On Douglass's conception of republican citizenship, what it means to contribute to the polity, and thereby be a citizen, is to act in ways that contest and shape what the polity values. We contest and shape what the polity values not only through public discourse traditionally conceived or grand political acts like revolt, but also through quotidian forms of social interaction. In his pre-American Civil War political thought, Douglass deployed his radically inclusive account of republican citizenship as the conceptual foundation of his stance that enslaved and nominally free Black Americans were already, in the 1850s, American citizens whom the polity ought to acknowledge as such. The everyday resistance in which enslaved Black Americans engaged—their plantation politics—is, for Douglass, a paradigmatic type of citizenship-constituting activity, because it involves modes of collaboration and confrontation that enact a recognition of mutual vulnerability and embody the assertion that one matters. Douglass's conception of republican citizenship offers a normative framework for emancipatory struggles that strive to secure meaningful membership for the marginalized through the transformation of unjust polities.

**Keywords** Frederick Douglass · Citizenship · Republicanism · Abolition · Social and Political Philosophy · History of African American Political Thought

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## 1 Introduction

Emancipatory struggles for inclusion are often framed as contesting *how* particular social groups ought to be incorporated into the political, social, and economic life of the polity.<sup>1</sup> For example, the 1848 “Declaration of Sentiments and Resolutions” at Seneca Falls demanded for women “the immediate admission to all the rights and privileges which belong to them as citizens of the United States” (Schneir 1994, 80). Labor unions frequently cast one of their fundamental aims as securing for workers a say over their working conditions and pay in the workplaces where they are employed. The Americans with Disabilities Act casts itself as a means to secure “equality of opportunity, full participation, independent living, and economic self-sufficiency” for disabled Americans.

As framed in each of these examples, the emancipatory struggle for inclusion is one that concerns how a polity ought to treat its members: what rights, powers, and privileges members ought to be afforded in virtue of their standing in the polity. A crucial assumption of this framing is that those whose inclusion is at issue are, in at least some basic sense, already recognized as members of the polity. What is at issue is how such persons, already assumed to be members, ought to be treated by their polity.

This is sometimes an inapt framing of emancipatory struggles for inclusion. Take, for instance, efforts, such as California’s Proposition 22, to deny transportation workers for app-based companies standing as employees of the companies for which they drive,<sup>2</sup> or the denial of basic due process to immigrants subject to detention and deportation (Golash-Boza, 2012). The forms of subordination to which persons in these positions are subjected — denial of their power to unionize or avail themselves of fundamental elements of the legal system — derive from a denial of their membership in a workplace or nation. An array of emancipatory struggles for inclusion are compelled to confront challenges not to *how* one ought to be treated as a member of a political community, but to *whether* one ought to be recognized as a member at all.

White supremacy and anti-Black racism constitute a paradigmatic, and virulent, strain of this radical form of exclusion. White supremacist ideology frequently casts racial others not as subordinate members of the polity, but as non-members about whom the question of inclusion ought not even arise. The problem that 19<sup>th</sup> century Black American political thinkers confronted was, as Melvin Rogers formulates it, a “denial of the very idea that any political status at all might be due to one” (2020, 79). This radical form of exclusion preempts any question of how one ought to be treated by her polity, because what is denied is that she has the standing to impose any obligations whatsoever upon it — the polity is not hers. Worse still, the possibilities for gaining membership under such conditions appear grim, in so far as membership is conceived of as a status that is conferred upon persons by a polity. If it is up to

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<sup>1</sup> It is worth acknowledging at the outset that not all emancipatory struggles aim at inclusion. Many anti-colonial struggles, for instance, did not envision their goal as integrating colonial subjects more fully into the empire, but as extricating the colonized from the power of the metropole. Yet ideals of inclusion are at times operative even in the context of decolonial political thought (Duong 2021).

<sup>2</sup> Key provisions of Proposition 22 were ruled unconstitutional by a California Superior Court judge in August 2021, but remain in force pending appeal of the ruling (Castellanos v. California).

a political community to decide who its members are, then emancipatory struggles against radical exclusion depend in the first place on shifting the will of those doing the excluding.

It is precisely this assumption that Frederick Douglass challenges in a republican conception of American citizenship that he develops in the decade prior to the American Civil War. In developing this conception of citizenship, Douglass rejects the assumption that membership in a political community is necessarily a status that the polity confers on persons. Instead, for Douglass, we constitute ourselves as republican citizens of a polity through modes of political agency realized in ordinary social life. What it is to be a citizen, on Douglass's republican conception, is to contribute to a polity by acting in ways that shape the fundamental values of the polity. The patterns of interaction through which we shape what the polity values also generate, at the same time, the normative fabric of rights-claims attached to this status. Crucially, the normative basis of one's status as a rights-bearing member of a polity is not that prevailing public opinion shifts to affirm this fact. Rather, the normative basis of one's claim to membership consists in the *activity* of contesting what the public values; what it means to contribute to a polity, and thereby be a citizen, is to engage in such activity.

I argue that Douglass offers a novel idea of what it means to contribute to a political community that outlines an innovative trajectory for re forging more inclusive political communities in the face of radical exclusion. The power to become a citizen and make rightful demands of a polity rests in our capacity to work both with and against others to shape the values of the community. This is precisely, Douglass shows, what enslaved and nominally free Black Americans did in resisting slavery and white supremacy in the antebellum US. The resistance of enslaved and nominally free Black people in the US contributed to the country by contesting its fundamental values, thereby constituting Black Americans as rights-bearing citizens.

Douglass's conception of republican citizenship is a compelling alternative to its classical formulation, on which freedom is a precondition of citizenship.<sup>3</sup> On classical republican accounts of citizenship, one has a rightful claim to citizenship because she is free, and the function of citizenship is to maintain and protect her freedom (Kapust, 2004; Maddox, 2002; McCormick 2003). On Douglass's republican account, by contrast, one becomes free precisely through efforts to seize citizenship for oneself—efforts which, for Douglass, are exemplified by the resistance of the enslaved. Douglass's republicanism offers a picture of political communities as products of its exercise of political agency in both collaborative and contestatory forms. In this way, Douglass is a primary exemplar of the distinctive strand of republicanism that 19<sup>th</sup> century Black Americans developed in response to the problem of radical exclusion (Rogers, 2020).

In essence, Douglass confronts the problem of radical exclusion by locating the metaphysical basis of political membership in concrete interactions between persons in ordinary social life and the communal normative fabric that is generated through these interactions. Political theorists and philosophers addressing issues of migration

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<sup>3</sup> “[I]n the classical republics, the freedom of citizens *presupposed* the unfreedom of slaves” (Gourevitch 2015, 14). Emphasis his.

today also take up this connection between participation in the social life of a polity and membership in it. Joseph Carens maintains that “[p]eople who live and work and raise their families in a society become members, whatever their legal status.” Their standing as members who participate in the life of the polity entails that “[i]t would be wrong to deport them... even if we have good reasons for wanting to make them leave and trying to prevent others like them from coming” (Carens, 2013). Sarah Song similarly argues that principles of social membership and fair play justify the extension of political standing and rights to temporary migrants, permanent non-citizen residents, and unauthorized migrants in virtue of quotidian forms of activity that such persons engage in, such as labor (Song, 2019). Douglass, in theorizing a response to the particularities of Black Americans’ radical exclusion from the antebellum United States, offers a framework that amplifies the emancipatory potential of grounding the concept of political membership in the sociality of political agency.

In section II, I show that Douglass’s republican conception of citizenship is the basis of his claim that enslaved Black people in the US possessed a ‘right of rebellion’ as a claim on the American polity. In section III, I explain how, for Douglass, Black Americans’ claim to citizenship is grounded in the idea of contributing to a polity by shaping its normative foundation. In section IV, I show how activity that contributes to a polity by shaping its normative foundation also generates rights-claims for those who engage in it. In section V, I show that, on Douglass’s account of plantation politics, antislavery resistance is activity that contributes to the polity, thereby constituting enslaved Black Americans as citizenship with rightful demands on the polity.

## 2 Right of Rebellion

In the decade leading up to the American Civil War, Douglass adopted an antislavery strategy known as political abolitionism; he sought to use American political institutions and values to combat slavery and white supremacy (see, for example, “A Call to Work” [1852] 1999; “Fremont and Dayton” [1856] 1999; “The Constitution of the United States: Is it Pro-Slavery or Anti-Slavery?” [1860] 1999; “The Chicago Nominations” [1860] 1999). One integral element of Douglass’s political abolitionism was his claim that Black people in the US were already American citizens: “[W]e declare that we are, and of right we ought to be *American Citizens*” (“The Claims of Our Common Cause” [1853] 1999, 264, his emphasis). Douglass grounds Black Americans’ standing as citizens in their commitment to resist tyranny and oppression (“resistance against tyranny is obedience to God” ([1853] 1999, 260)) articulated by the Declaration of Independence (“we are American citizens... by the principles of the Declaration of Independence” ([1853] 1999, 264)).

It was not uncommon for Black abolitionists in the antebellum period to characterize free Black Americans as citizens (Jones, 2018). But Douglass at times extended this claim to enslaved Black Americans as well. For instance, in his trenchant critique of the Dred Scott decision, Douglass asserts: “The Constitution knows all the human inhabitants of this country as part of the people” (“The Dred Scott Decision” [1857] 1999, 357). Douglass plainly has enslaved Black people in the forefront of his mind

in this assertion, referring to them as “fellow countrymen” at the outset of the speech ([1857] 1999, 344). In the face of a Supreme Court decision denying that Black people in the US have any claim to citizenship, Douglass doubles down. Black Americans, enslaved or (nominally) free, are citizens in the sense that they are members of the American people, to whom the polity bears political obligations— whether or not the polity recognizes, much less fulfills, its obligations.

Douglass indicates what it means to be a citizen in this sense in a crucial passage in his second autobiography, *My Bondage and My Freedom*. In this passage, Douglass argues that the hypocrisy of slaveholders justifies a right of rebellion for slaves:

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)

We see that enslaved Black Americans, whose just and inalienable rights are violated every hour, have a rightful claim to rebel in virtue of the hypocrisy of slaveholders. Prima facie, it might look like Douglass is referring to a reversionary right to forcefully break from a polity that fails to promote, and indeed radically harms, one’s basic interests. Such a right would not make a claim on the American polity; it would reflect the moral standing of enslaved people as human beings, rather than the political standing of enslaved people in the US as members of the American people.

Against this interpretation, note that Douglass emphasizes that slaveholders’ *hypocrisy* justifies slaves’ right of rebellion. Douglass’s emphasis on the hypocrisy of slaveholders in this passage is of a piece with his general emphasis in the period on the hypocrisy of white America, as we see for instance in his July 5, 1852 speech to an audience of predominately white antislavery supporters in Rochester, New York:

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 4<sup>th</sup> 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. (“The Meaning of July Fourth for the Negro” [1852] 1999, 195)

In decrying the hypocrisy of slaveholders, and white Americans generally, Douglass directs his audience’s attention to the fact that the actions of slaveholders are inconsistent with the fundamental political principles they espouse. But Douglass would not need to point to an *inconsistency* between the practices and principles of white Americans in order to justify a right to break from the polity. The plain fact that slavery and white supremacy are wrong— and severely harm enslaved and free Black people in the US— would suffice to justify a right to break with the polity, regardless of whether the racist practices are consistent with the fundamental principles of the

American polity. If the polity were rotten to the core, that would simply be all the more reason to break with it.

Instead, the right of rebellion is a claim enslaved people have on the American polity because of its failure to respect their standing as free, equal, but mutually dependent persons situated in and subject to the polity. This is a moral status, but it is also a political status: respect for agency in this circumstance involves respect for the capacity to exercise judgment and act in concert with other persons. The right of rebellion Douglass refers to in this passage is a right to rectify drastic disrespect for one's status as a political actor embedded in the polity—in this case, as a member of the American people.

But what is the point of this right of rebellion? Douglass plainly does not mean that such a right has been formally conferred on enslaved people by the American polity. Nor is Douglass, at least in the first place, concerned with codifying this right into American law; he is not, in these passages, mounting a legislative campaign for a right of rebellion. By asserting that antislavery insurrections are legitimate exercises of a political right to rectify the American polity's failure to fulfill its political obligations to Black Americans, Douglass implies that Black Americans, enslaved or free, are persons embedded in the polity whose status as political actors ought, by the polity's own lights, be respected. This is what it means, in Douglass's terminology, to be a 'fellow countryman' (i.e. a citizen qua member of the people): to have standing that imposes obligations on the polity to respect one as an agent who exercises judgment and acts in concert with others. The right of rebellion that enslaved Black Americans—and indeed Black Americans generally—legitimately exercise signals that, even though they are radically marginalized and oppressed in this system of slavery and white supremacy, they nevertheless stand as members of the polity. Because the right of rebellion is a political right, white Americans have an obligation to support legitimate enactments of the right. To the extent that white Americans appreciate this obligation, they acknowledge free and enslaved Black Americans as fellow members of the people.<sup>4</sup>

Thus, in attributing a right of rebellion to slaves, Douglass means to make manifest to his various audiences (in particular, white Americans with sympathies to anti-slavery) that enslaved Black Americans are citizens with legitimate claim to the same schedule of political, civil, and legal rights as white Americans. The task of Douglass's political abolitionism is to bring the institutional practices of the American polity into accord with the standing of enslaved and free Black Americans. In other words, the task of Douglass's political abolitionism is to make Black citizens free.

We have sketched a picture of citizenship on which even those radically marginalized and oppressed by a polity qualify as citizens: such persons can be members of the people with a rightful claim to a schedule of political, civil, and legal rights equal to those of other citizens. The challenge at this stage is to explain what grounds a claim to citizenship and political rights in this sense: in virtue of what are enslaved and free Black people in the US American citizens, on Douglass's view?

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<sup>4</sup>The right to rebellion is the right to compel a polity to acknowledge one's standing as a citizen qua member of the people. See (Yaure 2020).

### 3 Citizenship as Contribution

In his antebellum political thought, Douglass develops two different grounds for the rights-bearing citizenship status of oppressed and marginalized people. In one line of thought, Douglass argues that the political, civil, and legal rights of the citizen derive from the natural rights of the person. One of the natural rights of the person is to claim citizenship in a polity on the basis of birthright—because she was born in the polity. The positive rights of the citizen secure the person's natural right of liberty (*inter alia*). Because the slave is a person ("The manhood of the slave is conceded," Douglass urges in his July 5, 1852 speech), slaves in the US possess a natural right of liberty that must be protected by political institutions and a natural claim of birthright to call on the US to protect their natural rights by recognizing them as citizens ("The Meaning of July Fourth for the Negro" [1852] 1999, 195). This strand of Douglass's thought fits squarely into a liberal tradition of citizenship and rights (Myers, 2008).

But Douglass also develops a second line of argument in the antebellum period, grounded in the republican tradition. Enslaved and nominally free Black people, on this strand of Douglass's thought, are American citizens because they enact a commitment to resist tyranny and oppression. By enacting this commitment to resist tyranny and oppression, they contribute to the polity by contesting its normative foundation. The slave's struggle to be free is at the same time, Douglass argues, a struggle to remake a more just and free polity. In circumstances of injustice and oppression, struggle to reshape the normative foundation of the polity is the paradigmatic activity of the republican citizen.

Douglass appeals to the extensive contributions to the American polity made by Black Americans in an 1851 speech against calls for free Blacks to participate in white-organized colonization projects, "The Free Negro's Place is in America:"

I believe that simultaneously with the landing of the Pilgrims, there landed slaves on the shore of this continent, and that for two hundred and thirty years and more we have had a foothold on this continent. We have grown up with you; we have watered your soil with our tears; nourished it with our blood, tilled it with our hands. Why should we not stay here? We came when it was a wilderness, and were the pioneers of civilization on this continent. *We* levelled your forests, *our hands* removed the stumps from your fields, and raised the first crops and brought the first produce to your tables. We have been with you, are still with you, have been with you in adversity, and by the help of God will be with you in prosperity.... We have fought for this country... We are American citizens. ([1851] 1999, 177, his emphasis)

Here Douglass grounds a claim to membership in material contribution: Black Americans are citizens of the polity because they built the polity. The task for political abolitionism, on this picture, is to provide an accurate accounting of the labor of Black Americans, in order to make their standing as citizens obvious to the wider polity.

Yet one might worry that this picture fails to make sense of the systematic marginalization that Black Americans face. In a just polity, the labor of Black Americans would be recognized as a citizenship-constituting contribution to the polity. But the

systematic subordination of Black Americans makes clear that such labor is not valued by the polity as a citizenship-constituting contribution. If anything, attention to the history of the polity suggests that the American citizen is the person who exploits the polity-constituting labor of others, as Douglass's contemporary Martin Delany argues in his 1852 pamphlet, *The Condition, Elevation, Emigration, and Destiny of the Colored People of the United States* (2014).

Here is one way we can formulate the problem. In order for an act to constitute someone as a citizen, the polity has to value the act as a contribution. It thus appears that we simply have to hope that the polity values a particular kind of action as a citizenship-constituting contribution. But in an oppressive polity, we have good reason to expect that the polity will not value the actions of marginalized people as citizenship-constituting contributions: in large part, oppression itself consists in the exploitation, rather than the valuation, of the oppressed's labor. It seems that, on a republican conception of citizenship, we just have to hope that the polity values the right kind of contributions; but we have little reason to hope this is the case in the American context.

Douglass provides a solution to this problem in the closing lines of his Fifth of July speech. Here Douglass argues that a "plain reading" of the US Constitution demonstrates that it is an antislavery document, taking a side on a highly controversial topic among abolitionists in the 1850s. But what is important for our purposes is how Douglass frames his interpretation of the Constitution: "I hold that every American citizen has a right to form an opinion of the constitution, and to propagate that opinion, and to use all honorable means to make his opinion the prevailing one" ([1852] 1999, 204). Every citizen, Douglass maintains, has not only the right, but the ability to develop an opinion of the Constitution on the basis of "plain, commonsense rules, such as you and I, and all of us, can understand and apply, without having passed years in the study of law." Douglass is not denying that there is a place for technical legal interpretation of the Constitution. Rather, Douglass's claim is that there is a kind of activity that each of us has the power to engage in, and which we do engage in when—for instance—we form and advance an opinion on the foundational documents of our polity. When we form and advocate for such an opinion, we are contesting the normative foundations of the polity: we are articulating a vision for what the polity should value and do, and trying to bring others to share in this vision. What it is to be a republican citizen, on this account, is to act in ways that contest the normative foundation of the polity. We contribute to the polity, and thereby make ourselves citizens, by shaping what the polity values and how it acts on its values.

It is this conception of republican citizenship, and not faith in a static normative foundation of the polity, that I take to ground Douglass's hopefulness at the conclusion of the speech: "[N]otwithstanding the dark picture I have this day presented, of the state of the nation, I do not despair of this country. There are forces in operation which must inevitably work the downfall of slavery" ([1852] 1999, 204). Douglass's hopefulness, and his political abolitionism, are grounded in two claims:

1. People possess the power to shape what communities that they are situated in value.

2. Shaping what a community values is a membership-constituting contribution to the community.

When marginalized and oppressed peoples enact visions of more just polities, it is not that the content of these visions gives the wider polity reasons to confer citizenship, in the republican sense, upon the marginalized. Rather, enacting a vision of a more just polity itself constitutes the actor as a citizen, because this act contributes to the polity by shaping what it values.

This interpretation does not commit Douglass to the view that the American polity was at its founding organized solely around a commitment to resist tyranny and oppression (or other related emancipatory values). What makes someone a republican citizen, on this account, is that she acts in ways that shape the normative foundation of the polity. She need not act in a way that determines definitively what the polity values—indeed, on this account, it is impossible to definitively determine what the polity values. The normative foundation of a polity is always a site of contestation between competing visions of community. It is thus consistent for Douglass to maintain that the Declaration of Independence enacts a vision of a community that values resistance against tyranny and oppression with the observation that America is also shaped by a vision of a polity organized around hierarchies of race, gender, and class. What makes someone a citizen is not whether she happens to conform to the normative vision prevalent in a polity; what makes someone a citizen—in Douglass's republican sense—is that she acts in ways that rearticulate this normative vision, in potentially novel ways.

The inclusive potential of Douglass's republican citizenship hinges, however, on what kinds of acts shape the normative foundation of a polity. If shaping the normative foundation of a polity consists in constitutional interpretation, it might appear that only a quite restricted set of acts qualify. Interpretation could reasonably be characterized as robust participation in public discourse through speech and writing—as Douglass himself does in the Fifth of July speech. Yet these modes of political action require a platform to make one's voice heard. Moreover, in a polity, like the US, organized around a formal written constitution, it might seem that constitutional interpretation must make reference to this founding document (as well as perhaps other closely related ones). It seems clear that, on this gloss of constitutional interpretation, Douglass's republican citizenship would build in rigid hierarchies between those who have access to the platforms of public discourse and the requisite epistemic resources, and those who do not.

But Douglass himself offers a far more capacious characterization of what it means to engage in constitutional interpretation and thereby shape the normative foundation of the polity. In the rights of rebellion passage discussed in section II, Douglass asserts that slaves' right of rebellion stems from threats to "the just and inalienable rights of man," recalling the language of the Declaration of Independence. This passage is situated between two episodes of antislavery resistance central to *My Bondage and My Freedom*: the efforts of slaves on the plantation of William Freeland to organize a Sabbath school in which they taught one another to read through study of the Bible (an illicit activity that they had to conduct covertly), and an escape plot organized by a cohort from this Sabbath School. We will examine these episodes in

detail in section V. At this stage, the crucial point is that Douglass casts these acts of resistance as efforts to reforge a political community around the ‘just and inalienable rights of man.’ Douglass observes that for those involved in the escape plot, “[l]iberty was our aim; and we had now come to think that we had a right to liberty, against every obstacle” ([1855] 1987, 171). Those involved in the Sabbath school sought to further cultivate themselves as “moral and accountable beings” through the study of scripture ([1855] 1987, 163). At the same time, these efforts forged those involved into a “band of brothers” who are in essence “revolutionary conspirators” ([1855] 1987, 165, 171). In a reading of what he terms Douglass’s ‘plantation politics,’ Gooding-Williams argues that Douglass (in 1855) characterized himself and his fellow conspirators (in 1835) “in acting to assert their rights of rebellion... [as] imitat[ing] the founding fathers” (2009, 192). Through such resistance slaves “aspired to keep faith with the work of the founders... which was to establish a republic that respected ‘the just and inalienable rights of man’” (Gooding-Williams, 2009, 192). I maintain that this parallel depends not on a (perhaps tenuous) claim that the founders and slaves shared an emancipatory vision for America. Rather, the parallel refers primarily to how both the founders and slaves constituted themselves as citizens by shaping the normative foundation of the polity through action in concert— action through which they became ‘bands of brothers.’<sup>5</sup>

What Douglass understands as ‘constitutional interpretation,’ then, is not merely rarified public discourse on the details of the written constitution. Instead, we interpret the polity’s constitution— in other words, contribute to the polity— whenever we interact with others to bring about a vision of what we value. Enslaved Black people are republican citizens, on Douglass’s account, because they engage in acts of coordinated resistance that are animated by and express a normative vision of the ‘just and inalienable rights of man.’ Douglass’s account of republican citizenship is thus grounded in an understanding of political agency that consists in the power of persons to act together for collective interests. This power, for Douglass, forges and reforges the values of a political community, and at the same time shapes and reshapes the community’s membership.

#### 4 Rights and Relationships of Commitment

Section III provided an account of what makes us citizens: we contribute to the polity by acting in ways that shape its normative foundation. But this does not yet explain whence the rights attached to citizenship, such as a right of rebellion for oppressed and marginalized citizens, derive. One seemingly intuitive account is not

<sup>5</sup> We should acknowledge that there is a gendered dimension to Douglass’s picture of emancipatory political agency. The band which talks, plots, and eventually acts in antislavery resistance is after all one of *brothers*. Gendered political claims do crop up with some frequency in Douglass’s political thought, however. See, for instance, Douglass’s 1855 lecture for the Rochester Ladies’ Anti-Slavery Society, “The Anti-Slavery Movement” ([1855] 1999, 323–24). Gooding-Williams notes that it isn’t obvious these gendered commitments are part of the substantive architecture of Douglass’s political thought (2009, 318 fn 125). For a demonstration of this point, which draws on the “restorative care” relationships among Douglass and his band of brothers, see (Alfaro 2018).

viable for Douglass's purpose of establishing the rights claims of free and enslaved Black Americans. On this intuitive account, contributing to the polity by shaping its normative foundation generates political rights instrumentally. Our efforts to shape what the polity values are in large part efforts to shape how the polity should treat its members. On this intuitive account, when we are successful in establishing our normative vision of the polity, the now-established vision then determines the political rights of the citizen.

But this cannot be Douglass's account of how the political rights of the citizen are generated. Douglass maintains that free and enslaved Black Americans are already, in the 1850s, citizens who possess a robust schedule of political, civil, and legal rights; the white supremacist practices of the polity wrong Black Americans *as citizens*. If the rights of the citizen are determined by the established normative foundation of the polity, the vision of an inclusive polity that extends these rights to all equally would already need to have been realized. But this vision is what, Douglass thinks, Black Americans fight to bring about through antislavery resistance. The contribution that Black Americans make that constitutes them as citizens depends precisely on the fact that this inclusive vision of the polity has not yet been realized. Given Douglass's account of what makes Black Americans citizens—that they engage in struggle to enact an inclusive vision of the polity—the established normative foundation of the polity cannot already confer a schedule of political rights to Black citizens that is integral to Douglass's political abolitionism.

What's at stake here is ruling out a stable status of second-class citizenship. The intuitive account puts the power of seizing citizenship status in the hands of a political actor, but allows the polity to decide how to treat those who possess this status, including conferring inferior schedules of rights to some. In contrast, Douglass's radically inclusive conception of republican citizenship holds that acts which shape the normative foundation of the polity themselves generate the political rights of the citizen, rather than the effects of these acts. The question is: how can the exercise of political agency constitutively, rather than instrumentally, generate the rights of the citizen?

The key, for Douglass, is to ground the rights of the citizen in the sociality of political agency. In other words, our claims on the polity are generated through our open-ended yet normatively-laden interactions with one another. This is reflected, for instance, in how Douglass situates the claim of Black Americans to a right of rebellion amidst his account of antislavery resistance by slaves on the plantation. Here we come to see that Black Americans possess a right of rebellion through the normative commitments generated among actors in their plantation politics.

The next section will focus specifically on how antislavery resistance generates rights like that of rebellion for enslaved Black Americans. In this section, I explain what it means to say that the rights of citizens derive from interpersonal interactions generally. To do this, I turn to a contemporary account on which the rights and obligations attached to social and political roles such as citizen, caregiver, and worker are generated by the patterns of action and response through which we *commit* ourselves to one another (Marin, 2017).

One of Marin's key theoretical innovations is to show how impersonal, structural relations can also be understood as relationships of commitment (2017, 45-66). Structural relations, like citizenship, qualify as relationships of commitment because

they are constituted and maintained by the same kinds of agency that personal relationships of commitment are constituted and maintained. On Marin's account, the agency that we possess, for example, as citizens, is not best understood as control over a sphere of life delineated by political rights conferred by the state. Rather, what it is to exercise agency as a citizen is to participate in a pattern of open-ended action and response with others (Marin, 2017, 58; Krause 2015). The normative core of our relationship as neighbors would be obscured by focus on the domains that you and I independently control: what it is for you and I to be neighbors is not centrally that I decide what to plant in one yard, and you decide what to plant in the adjacent one. Rather, the normative core of our relationship as neighbors concerns the ways in which we work with (and sometimes against) one another in pursuit of our needs and desires. When we view structural relations like citizenship as commitments, we similarly capture the normative core of our relationship as fellow citizens as concerning the ways in which we work with and against one another.

These structural relations of commitment are organized around our vulnerability to one another (Marin, 2017, 65). Through political community, people organize themselves in ways that arrange their mutual vulnerability more or less equitably. Marin emphasizes that institutions like the law do not eliminate, but instead channel, our vulnerability to one another (2017, 71). Through institutions of the polity such as law, fellow citizens are vulnerable to and depend on one another, even if they never meet.

At the same time, structural relationships of commitment cannot be wholly impersonal. I need not interact directly with all of my fellow citizens, but I must interact directly with some. This is because vulnerability manifests itself our concrete interactions with one another. If political community organizes our vulnerability to one another in particular ways (rather than eliminating it), then political community must involve concrete interactions between persons in which this vulnerability plays out. Your decision may affect me although we never interact directly, but it affects me because I interact directly with *someone* in the community.

Moving beyond Marin's account of structural relations, we can set up Douglass's claim that enslaved Black Americans possess political rights like that of rebellion by distinguishing two aspects of interaction in political life that respond to vulnerability: (1) action in concert and (2) contestation. When we act in concert, we coordinate in pursuit of a shared end. This shared end can be very concrete or highly abstract: we might be working towards a well-defined goal (e.g. winning a union contract with a specified compensation gain) or we might be engaged in a shared effort to determine what our shared priorities or values are. When we engage in contestation, we work against one another in pursuit of opposing ends. Again, these may be very specific (e.g. company management and a union fighting over the compensation details in a contract) or highly abstract (e.g. disputing the general normative priority of freedom and equality). It is important to note that a particular effort can be accurately described both as action in concert and contestation: union members on strike act in concert with one another while engaging in contestation against management.

Activity that involves action in concert or contestation (typically both) is constitutive of commitment in political communities. Where commitment is developed through action in concert, we encounter it in the forging of social bonds through

which we recognize and support one another in our shared vulnerability. Where commitment is developed through contestation, we encounter it in changes in patterns of behavior that respond to our efforts to secure ourselves from particular modes of vulnerability.

While Douglass's account of republican citizenship explains how obligation-bearing relationships of commitment are generated in political communities, Marin's account explains why Douglass's republican citizens, and in particular free and enslaved Black Americans, possess specific rights that impose obligations on the rest of the polity, such as a right of rebellion. For Marin, our political obligations to fellow citizens are generated by our efforts—through action in concert and contestation—to respond to our mutual vulnerability. The obligations that we impose on fellow citizens (and thus the political rights that we possess) take a particular form in virtue of what we do to address our vulnerability. What we do to address our vulnerability depends, in turn, on the specific form that our vulnerability to others takes. The right of rebellion (or, we might say, to concerted resistance generally) that Douglass attributes to slaves in *My Bondage and My Freedom* thus derives from their resistance against, as Douglass would put it, tyranny and oppression. The patterns of resistance that enslaved, as well as free, Black Americans engage in ubiquitously against slavery and white supremacy are patterns of action in concert and contestation that respond to vulnerability. The right of rebellion is generated by this pattern of resistance, which tracks the ways in which enslaved and free Black Americans are in fact vulnerable under white supremacy.

Douglass addresses the problem of second-class citizenship by deriving the rights of the citizen from the exercise of their own political agency, through patterns of action in concert and contestation that respond to our mutual vulnerability. This does not render the category of second-class citizenship unintelligible, but it does put the power of determining the normative import of one's citizenship in her own hands. This is empowering *prima facie*, but one might worry that its emancipatory potential is deeply constrained. Enslaved people's ability to act in concert and contestation, according to this worry, is deeply limited—precisely by the circumstances of vulnerability in which they are situated. So it might seem practically inevitable that Douglass's republican citizenship would confer an inferior political status on slaves—on anyone whose autonomy is severely constrained through domination and oppression. How much power can be insurgent under conditions of oppression?

## 5 Political Agency in Plantation Politics

In order for Douglass to hold that enslaved, as well as nominally free, Black Americans are full republican citizens, he must demonstrate that they regularly engage in the action in concert and contestation that generate rights and shape what the polity values. For the purposes of this section, I will focus on Douglass's argument concerning enslaved Black Americans; I will assume that if Douglass can make this case for enslaved Black Americans, he can also make the case for nominally free Black Americans.

The crux of Douglass's argument for the claim that enslaved Black Americans engage in citizenship-generating action in concert and contestation is that (1) enslaved Black Americans engage ubiquitously in antislavery resistance, and (2) such antislavery resistance involves both action in concert and contestation.

The planation in *My Bondage and My Freedom* is suffuse with antislavery resistance. The middle portion of Douglass's narrative is organized around three episodes of resistance: Douglass's fight with the 'slavebreaker' Covey, a 'Sabbath school' that Douglass covertly organizes in which slaves teach one another to read, and an escape attempted by core participants in the Sabbath school ([1855] 1987, 148-49, 162-65, 166-81). (Douglass's actual escape is, in *Bondage*, a coda to these episodes ([1855] 1987, 195-202).<sup>6</sup> But these episodes of resistance, in which Douglass is a core actor, occur against the backdrop of a wider pattern of resistance on the planation. Nelly and her children "nobly resisted" the attack of an overseer; in Douglass's estimation this resistance prevented Nelly from being targeted in the future ([1855] 1987, 61-63). Denby similarly refuses to submit to an overseer's attack; he is shot dead for his refusal ([1855] 1987, 78). Douglass is in fact involved in the organization of two Sabbath schools, the first of which is menaced and shut down by a group of slaveholders including his former owner Thomas Auld ([1855] 1987, 124-25). Even quotidian activities like singing, Douglass observes, are acts of resistance which slaves perform collaboratively ([1855] 1987, 65).

Such resistance, as Douglass characterizes it, typically involves action in concert. The coordination involved may be spontaneous, as when other slaves refuse to assist Covey as Douglass overpowers him, or it may be consciously organized, as in Douglass's first escape attempt. But a consistent theme of *Bondage* is that acts of resistance take a collective form. Even seemingly individual acts, Douglass shows, involve patterns of action and response among multiple actors. When Douglass covertly teaches himself to read as a child in Baltimore, he finds support from young white boys who were formally schooled, with whom Douglass would exchange bread for reading lessons. Through these interactions, the young boys come to affirm Douglass's claim to freedom, telling him that "they believed that *I* had as good a right to be free as *they* had" ([1855] 1987, 99). The patterns of collective action through which enslaved people and supporters resist slavery and white supremacy generate principled commitments to one another. The young boys become committed to Douglass's freedom; Douglass and other slaves become committed to one another's security and well-being. The generation of these principled commitments shapes what members of the polity value—and, in the aggregate, can be said to shape what the polity itself values. In this way, acts of antislavery resistance that involve action in concert function as citizenship-constituting contributions for those who engage in them. Sustained action in concert crystallizes these commitments into robust social bonds with complex, open-ended normative demands that serve as the normative fabric of the rights-claims Douglass attaches to Black Americans' citizenship. Douglass illustrates this point through the "band of brothers" that he forges on the plantation of William Freeland, to whom Douglass's master, Thomas Auld, had hired him out. Not long after he arrives in January of that year, Douglass began organizing a Sabbath school, through

<sup>6</sup> Douglass withholds details about his successful escape so as not to publicize his strategy to slaveholders.

which he intended “to impart the little knowledge of letters which I possessed, to my brother slaves” ([1855] 1987, 162). From two initial students, John and Henry Harris, “the contagion spread” to “twenty or thirty young men, who enrolled themselves, gladly, in my Sabbath school, and were willing to meet me regularly, under the trees or elsewhere, for the purpose of learning to read” ([1855] 1987, 162). The following year, Douglass organized a runaway plot with core members of the second Sabbath school, John and Henry Harris, Sandy Jenkins, Charles Roberts, and Henry Bailey. Through their collective efforts at education, the members of the Sabbath school came to a robust commitment to one another’s security and well-being.

This commitment crystallizes into a bond that Douglass characterizes as such:

I never loved, esteemed, or confided in men, more than I did in these. They were true as steel, and no band of brothers could have been more loving. There were no mean advantages taken of each other, as is sometimes the case where slaves are situated as we were; no tattling; no giving each other bad names to Mr. Freeland; and no elevating one at the expense of the other. We never undertook to do any thing, of any importance, which was likely to affect each other, without mutual consultation. We were generally a unit, and moved together. Thoughts and sentiments were exchanged between us, which might well be called very incendiary, by oppressors and tyrants. ([1855] 1987, 165)

Moving together as a unit, participants in the Sabbath school came to love and trust one another, expect loyalty and solidarity, and deliberate collectively in a non-paternalistic fashion. These bonds imposed substantive, open-ended demands on members of the band. When the Sabbath school evolved into a runaway plot, one of the members revealed the plot to their slaveholder, fatally compromising it. This act was not merely a failure to coordinate; Douglass characterizes it as a “betrayal,” because it was a violation of the demands of loyalty that undermined trust and solidarity among members of the band ([1855] 1987, 181). It would be reasonable to say that the members of the band had a right to each participant’s silence about their escape plot, although the informal band lacked an institutional mechanism for enforcing the right. Collective antislavery resistance generates rich normative commitments among those engaged in it; it supplies the normative fabric from which institutionally-determinate rights-claims could be fashioned.

Yet Douglass does not see antislavery resistance as only shaping the values of and generating rights-claims among those collaboratively engaged in such resistance. He also sees antislavery resistance as shaping values and generating rights that bear on the *targets* of resistance. The claim of enslaved Black people in the US to American citizenship and its rights is grounded as equally, for Douglass, in their contestation of oppressive institutions as their collaboration with one another.

Anti-slavery resistance involves contestation between the enslaved and those who exploit them. These struggles are always directed at concrete goals— to ward off an immediate physical threat, to gain knowledge, to put oneself beyond the reach of the slave system. But resistance always, for Douglass, embodies a normative claim that the resisters are justified in their efforts to attain their concrete goals. For instance, Douglass argues that enslaved people are justified in ‘stealing’ from slaveholders: “I

hold that the slave is fully justified in helping himself to the *gold and silver, and the best apparel of his master, or that of any other slaveholder; and that such taking is not stealing in any just sense of the word*" ([1855] 1987, 119, his emphasis). Prima facie, it looks like Douglass's justification for this expropriation is that enslaved people are absolved from responsibility for their actions: "Make a man a slave, and you rob him of moral responsibility" ([1855] 1987, 119). But Douglass casts these acts of expropriation as responses to conditions of extreme depravation ("[a]ll know the lightness of Indian corn-meal") ([1855] 1987, 117). Such 'theft' in fact embodies a commitment to self-preservation, which implies one's own moral value. To resist for the sake of survival under conditions of oppression and depravation is to assert that one *matters*.

While, as in the case of 'theft,' such acts of resistance and their assertions of moral value are sometimes covert, at other times, Douglass observes, resisters address their oppressors with assertions of their moral value. Sometimes, as in Douglass's fight with Covey, this is done through dramatic confrontation. But Douglass also points to less militant modes of confrontation through which slaves asserted their moral standing to their oppressors. For instance, Douglass describes the practice of appeal as an important element of plantation politics, in which slaves would protest maltreatment by overseers to slaveowners:

[W]hen a slave has nerve enough to [appeal], and boldly approaches his master, with a well-founded complaint against an overseer, though he may be repulsed, and may even have that of which he complains repeated at the time, and, though he may be beaten by his master, as well as the overseer, for his temerity, in the end the policy of complaining is, generally, vindicated by the by the relaxed rigor of the overseer's treatment. The latter becomes more careful, and less disposed to use the lash upon such slaves thereafter. *It is with this final result in view, rather than with any expectation of immediate good, that the outraged slave is induced to meet his master with a complaint.* ([1855] 1987, 56, my emphasis)

Regardless of the accuracy of Douglass's empirical claim—that such protest was in fact effective in mitigating the violence of overseers—the crucial point for our purposes is that the goal of such protest is to improve one's conditions for the sake of self-preservation. Because these acts of protest embody a commitment to self-preservation, they are assertions of the resisters' moral value. Moreover, unlike covert acts of expropriation, these assertions of moral standing are made manifest to oppressors in explicit acts of contestation. We need not—and I think Douglass does not—adopt any general stance on the relative value of these different modes of resistance. The key point is that it is *possible* to assert one's own moral value through many different forms of resistance, and that many different forms of antislavery resistance in fact assert the moral value of the enslaved.

These assertions of one's moral value—that one *matters*—shape the normative foundation of the polity. In particular, they contest exclusionary ideas of who the polity and its members should value. It is important to note that enslaved Black Americans' claim to citizenship is constituted, on this account, not by these assertions

‘winning out’ as the prevailing public opinion. Rather, the act of asserting of one’s moral value itself constitutes one as a citizen precisely by contesting what the polity value: the contestation itself, rather than its product, is the citizenship-constituting contribution.

Similarly, the contestation of antislavery resistance generates rights, like the right of rebellion, not by persuading the powerful to confer such rights on the marginalized— rather, contestation generates rights by catalyzing patterns of action and response that are themselves the normative material of rights-claims. It is precisely the fact that subjection to tyrannical power is incompatible with enslaved resisters’ assertions that they matter which generates the their right of rebellion. The slaveholder, in Douglass’s words, invites “the knife to his own throat” by affirming that the “fathers of the republic” generated their own right of rebellion through a similar pattern of resistance against an imperial crown ([1855] 1987, 165).

These dual aspects of antislavery resistance— action in concert and contestation— work in tandem to constitute enslaved Black Americans as citizens and generate the rights-claims attached to their standing as citizens. Both aspects of antislavery resistance serve both functions, to constitute citizenship and generate rights. This is a virtue of the account: it offers a resilient picture of political agency, on which its power to forge political community manifests in a diversity of forms. Moreover, the account points to the potential for these aspects of resistance to work in an interlocking fashion to forge community. For instance, action in concert, as in the case of Douglass’s Sabbath school, can generate a sense of solidarity that enables contestation to express a *collective* commitment to self-preservation— an assertion that *we* matter. To the extent that resistance to oppression can foster a wide sense of racial (or gender, or class) solidarity, Douglass’s framework lays the groundwork for group-based claims to political membership (Shelby 2002).

One may object at this stage that Douglass’s account of Black Americans’ claim to American citizenship depends on an overly romanticized image of plantation politics suffuse with coordinated antislavery resistance.<sup>7</sup> It is right to say that Douglass conceives of antislavery resistance as ubiquitous in and around the plantation. But we should keep in mind the diverse modes of resistance that Douglass has in mind: such resistance is comprised of not only revolts and acts of physical confrontation, but also collective efforts at education, care and other social reproductive labor, and communal acts of meaning-making—including telling one’s own story. Understood in this broad way, it is plausible for Douglass to characterize antislavery resistance as ubiquitous.

But the objection recognizes that the criterion of citizenship on Douglass’s account is demanding: we have to act in certain ways in order to become citizens. Shaping polities and becoming members of them is an accomplishment on this picture. It is conceivable for people to lack the agency to achieve this accomplishment. In particular, Douglass makes three assumptions about the political agency necessary to make oneself a citizen, which he maintains that enslaved people possess:

1. Human beings seek sociality in response to vulnerability.

<sup>7</sup> I am indebted to Emma Rodman for this challenge.

2. Human beings have the capacity to formulate goals and values in consultation with others.
3. Human beings envision their actions as contributing to wider projects that reflect their aspirations and values.

It is when we exercise these capacities that we shape what the polity values. In response to vulnerability, we seek social relations with others. In these relations, we formulate goals and values that reflect and respond to our mutual vulnerability to one another. And in acting for these goals and on these values, we envision ourselves as contributing to their collective realization. The exercise of these capacities in patterns of action and response, which manifest in action in concert and contestation, generate obligations on one another, which serve as the normative building blocks of political community. Douglass's claim that enslaved and nominally free Black Americans are full republican citizens ultimately depends on the claim that enslaved and nominally free Black Americans possess the capacities requisite for action in concert and contestation, and that, moreover, these capacities are regularly exercised even under conditions of severe oppression.

Douglass's characterization of political agency, and his view that even those subject to severe forms of oppression possess such agency, reflects a commitment to a non-paternalistic (and in that sense democratic) emancipatory politics. If you deny that certain people possess and exercise these capacities, then you must adopt an outlook on which those who do possess these capacities must exercise them for the sake of those who lack them. The viability of Douglass's republican citizenship is delimited by the plausibility of attributing these capacities to those who seek it.

## 6 Conclusion

In this paper, I have shown how Frederick Douglass's antebellum declaration that enslaved and nominally free Black Americans were already American citizens invokes a republican conception of citizenship, on which political membership in a community is grounded in contribution to that community. What it is to contribute to a political community, on Douglass's account, is to act in ways that shape what the community values. Crucially, the basis of citizenship on this account is not the content of the polity's normative foundation. In order for the marginalized in a polity to claim citizenship, it is not necessary that they win out in struggle over the polity's normative foundation, achieving consensus within the polity that they are members of it. Rather, the basis of citizenship is the struggle itself. The patterns of action and response through which contributions are enacted are also the basis of commitments—normative claims that members of a community make on one another in virtue of their interaction. The foundations of citizenship, on this picture, are the normatively-laden interactions of persons through which the fabric of political community is weaved.

In the specific context of enslaved and nominally free Black Americans in the 1850s, Douglass's account shows how resistance in both grand and quotidian forms shaped the normative foundation of the polity and generates rights-claims for those

engaged in resistance. Through antislavery resistance, Black Americans asserted their moral worth, contesting the normative foundation of a community that denied it. This contestation was at the same time action in concert: it involved collaboration that generated commitments among those engaged in resistance. These aspects of antislavery resistance worked in tandem to constitute Black Americans as citizens who had rightful demands on the polity to acknowledge their moral values as members.

Some might reasonably be wary of a conception of citizenship on which something so capacious as 'shaping what the polity values' constitutes one as a citizen. After all, those who espouse oppressive ideology and enact injustice contest the normative foundation of the polity as well. The efforts of slaveholders, on this account, are citizenship-constituting contributions to the polity, just as antislavery resistance is citizenship-constituting for Black Americans.

This is an implication of the radically inclusive character of Douglass's republican citizenship. Whenever I act in ways that are intelligible to other members of the polity—in ways that induce patterns of action and response—I act in ways that make me a member as well. But this does not mean that Douglass's republican citizenship is a neutral concept in emancipatory struggle. While oppressors can shape the normative foundation of the polity by espousing white supremacist and exclusionary ideals, even the success of such efforts cannot compromise the republican citizenship of those they seek to marginalize. This is because it is the *act* of contesting and shaping what the polity values that makes one a citizen. My espousing of exclusionary values does not render your citizenship-constituting efforts at inclusion impotent. In this way, Douglass's republican citizenship thus provides a normative upper-hand to those engaged in emancipatory efforts that aim at inclusion.

On Douglass's account, citizenship, and the rights of the citizen, are neither a natural fact that we discover, nor a status that is conferred on persons by a polity. Citizenship, and the rights of the citizen, are instead seized through the collective exercise of political agency. This, I contend, offers a distinctively emancipatory idea of political community because it locates the normative basis of political standing in the agency of those who seek it, rather than in the will of those who seek to exclude them. Of course, this is not to say that defining citizenship in this way itself resolves problems of marginalization and oppression. The philosophical task of showing that Douglass's is a coherent way of concept of citizenship is not equivalent to the political task of establish this the hegemonic concept of citizenship in a particular polity. The conceptual point that the relevant forms of political agency are insurgent and ubiquitous even under conditions of profound oppression is consistent with the concrete reality that persons exercising their political agency in resistance to oppression are frequently isolated from one another, harmed, and killed. The derivation of citizens' rights from their exercise of their own agency does not short-circuit the power of formal political and legal institutions to retrench in efforts to preserve oppressive hierarchies (Crenshaw 1995, Hartman 1997 164-206). Douglass's emancipatory political philosophy is not a substitute for the actual work of emancipatory politics.

But what Douglass's emancipatory political philosophy offers, through its formulation of republican citizenship, is a way of reconceptualizing the task of emancipatory political struggles that confront the problem of radical exclusion. Drawing on Douglass's conception of republican citizenship provides those engaged in such

struggle with a conceptual vocabulary for contesting the basis of a polity's power to define its membership. An emancipatory politics organized around a demand to acknowledge a status that someone has already seized for themselves takes a different shape than one that is organized around a petition to confer a status that one lacks. The latter emancipatory politics understands resistance as an instrument through which the marginalized can lay siege to the political sentiments of the privileged in the hopes of changing these sentiments and through this the boundaries of the polity. The transformation of the polity depends on first changing what those who hold the power believe — the potential for inclusion is circumscribed by the possibilities for persuasion.

In contrast, for the former emancipatory politics, the transformative power of resistance is intrinsic rather than instrumental: resistance, as a collaborative and contestatory mode of political agency, is a form of political activity through which persons constitute themselves as members of a polity and thereby change the polity's boundaries. While persuasion of the powerful is also itself one kind of activity through which persons constitute themselves as members — because it is one type of concrete social activity that involves normatively-laden patterns of action and response — it is afforded no special status in the struggle for inclusion. All varieties of normative-laden social interaction have the power to forge and reforge the bounds of a political community. The metaphysics of citizenship that we find in Douglass's plantation politics enables us to think of the whole array of human sociality and political agency as potential sources of emancipatory transformation.

**Acknowledgements** For helpful conversations and comments at various stages of this project, I thank Eric Bayruns García, Colin Bradley, César Cabezas, Yarran Hominh, Bernard Jackson, Dhananjay Jagannathan, Michele Moody-Adams, Frederick Neuhouser, Jennifer Pitts, Mark Sanders, Chloe Stowell, Ronald Sundstrom, and Mira Wolf-Bauwens. I also thank audiences at the American Philosophical Association Pacific Division 2021 Meeting, Oxford Graduate Conference in Political Theory, Society for the Advancement of American Philosophy, Stanford Graduate Conference in Political Theory, University of Chicago Graduate Conference in Political Theory, and Villanova Political Epistemologies Conference. I am especially grateful for the insights of two anonymous reviewers at Philosophical Studies, Robert Gooding-Williams, and Emma Rodman.

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