

"Mask in Motion": Dialect Spaces and Class Representation in Frederick Douglass' Atlantic Rhetoric

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In a speech delivered in 1887 in Washington DC, at a reception held in honour of Arthur O'Conner and Thomas Gratton Edmonde, Frederick Douglass related the following anecdote, allegedly taken from his 45 years of experience as an anti-slavery speaker and activist: "Speaking in Ohio, some time ago, a good Irishman, after I had got through, walking behind me, said to another Irishman: 'Jimmie, what do you think of that?' 'Faith,' said he, 'he is only a half nagur.' (Laughter.) 'Ah but,' said he, 'if half a nagur could make a speech like that, what could a whole one do?' (Great laughter.)" (*FDP* 1:2, 7)

In his essay "Change the Joke and Slip the Yoke," Ralph Ellison writes of the dangers of reading the trickster figure in African American literature and folklore through the lens of white American culture. "In the entertainment industry," Ellison states, "the Negro is reduced to a negative sign that usually appears in a comedy of the grotesque and the unacceptable," concluding that, because "the fact of Negro slavery went to the moral heart of the American social drama,... [it] was too real for easy fantasy, too serious to be dealt with in anything less than a national art." (Ellison 1542-3)

Douglass' engagement with oral forms of identity formation in his public speaking sees him calibrating the verbal masks of that art form to coincide with an ongoing quest for a system of signs that can fully acknowledge his representative status. In this instance, Douglass challenges the racial profile of performative mimicry in the United States through manipulation of his own self-portrayal, reversing the negative image of African Americans created in blackface minstrelsy. This is realised not merely by revising the meaning of blackness in minstrel performance to indicate linguistic and rhetorical achievement, but by appropriation of the forms of ethno-racial codification endemic to minstrelsy, and part of the particularisation of identity in the US in the nineteenth century. Most notably, Douglass' rebuttal of populist racial stereotyping involves the iteration of ethnically defined dialect spaces, confirming Ellison's contention that "the Negro's [own] masking is motivated... by a profound rejection of the image used to usurp his identity." (Ellison 1547)

In this encounter therefore, Douglass and his audience view one another other across the racial joke Ellison identifies at the heart of understandings of what is valid or true about US experience and identity. For Douglass' performance has farther-reaching implications than a somewhat doubtful humour. His performative skill is demonstrated by the alacrity with which he slips from black- into white-face, hybridizing the identity underlying his multiple linguistic masks by complicating its relationship to those discrete forms of US subjectivity that claim exclusive privilege over particular ethno-racial or political signifiers.

The encoded subversion of this symbolic inversion of Afro- and Irish American identities from Douglass' late nineteenth-century rhetoric taps into the theatrical displays regulating the class and cultural politics of the antebellum period, when the tensions between racial categories and class identification began to find expression on the US American popular stage. Douglass' performance confirms the importance assumed by masking in the representation and appropriation of political agency in the late nineteenth century, for African Americans as for other sections of US society. For Douglass reproduces, then breaches historio-cultural codes of racial representation through a combination of ventriloquism and cultural creolization. Indeed, this reference by Douglass to his own mixed racial heritage in the late phase of a career spent as a writer, abolition advocate, Union war correspondent and critic of Reconstruction, returns once again to the broader issue of ethno-national identity, underlining the degree to which the political, personal and racial aspects of that issue saturate nineteenth-century discursive fields.

Today, Douglass is perhaps best known for his three autobiographies, which detail his life in slavery, flight to freedom and emergence as a public figure. These carefully crafted, textual acts of self-creation have ensured Douglass' place in western historical and literary canons, where he is now generally recognized by US historians as the representative African American of the nineteenth century. (*FDP* 1:1, xi) Of particular importance to Douglass' iteration of identity in all its guises was his use of dialect spaces, which form an important element of his early rhetoric. Much of the efficacy of Douglass' activism sprang from the popularity he enjoyed as a public speaker, his command of the platform, ability to capture and hold the attention of large crowds, and sway them with his rhetorical skill. Indeed, accounts of Douglass' eloquence testify not only to his rhetorical achievements but to the importance of the role of performance and spectacle in his work: as modes of communication, as core elements in the politics of representation and in manipulating popular engagements with official discourse and ideology in the public sphere. According to Blassingame, "[d]ramatic skill contributed heavily to Douglass' success as an orator. On the platform, he was a tragedian, a comic, a mimic and an occasional singer." (*FDP* 1:1, xxxi) Although now extant only as (often highly mediated) transcriptions of his voice, much of the early oratory of Frederick Douglass presents an order of resistance to categories of class and racial archotyping that does not privilege the profile of the universal individual of liberal political discourse, frequently iterated in the context of the subject's mastery of literacy and text.

Indeed, though the importance of the role of literacy in Douglass' path to freedom has been much remarked upon, due in large part to the centrality of literacy in the *Narrative*, "linking reading and writing inextricably with social development" is, as Valerie Smith acknowledges, "to display an inherent bias toward Anglo-American uses of language." (Smith 4)¹ Even a work that privileges literacy to the extent demonstrated in the 1845 *Narrative*, however, includes descriptions of non-literary, non-abolitionist modes of resistance in the slave culture Douglass describes. (Sharpe 34-5)² But his use of such modes in performance more clearly illustrates the extent to which forms of alternative cultural practice influenced his rhetoric, providing insight into the social dynamics of abolitionism and marking the concurrent presence of forms of resistance to bondage which, due to their non-hegemonic cultural referents, are better classed as anti-slavery.

Douglass' non-literary work, in the period from his initiation as an antislavery speaker while still a fugitive in 1841, to his manumission in 1847, corresponds to a period in which, as Gilroy writes, Douglass' "consciousness of 'race,' self and society were profoundly changed." (Gilroy 132) That period marked Douglass' emergence into the moral economy of western modernity and the beginning of his self-authorization as representative US nation-subject. Paradoxically, although characterized by an almost unprecedented class rise, this phase also shows evidence of an interest in more populist representations of African American identity, and specifically in non-modern performative practices, namely verbal masking and minstrelsy. The prioritization of literacy and of the rational rhetoric of enlightened subjectivity has tended to overshadow those forms of alternative practice or engagements with cultural formations present in Douglass' work that do not support his current canonical or historical profile. (Gates 1987, 106-8)³ Such practices include elements of carnival, mimicry, and politically informed, class-based cultural activity with objectives not necessarily coterminous with those outlined in their subsequent historicization.

Douglass' rhetorical employment of alternative strategies of political negotiation included the incorporation of elements of carnival, a racially overdetermined vocabulary of class, and mimicry, to his public performances. The existence of these elements posits an (albeit tense) relationship between Douglass and a concurrent, racialized mode of cultural representation, that of blackface minstrelsy. His interaction with non-élite forms of representation relates to current discussions concerning the role of minstrelsy in white working-class formation in the United States, and indicates the extent to which the form impacted on the transatlantic reform

platform during the early to mid-nineteenth century. For Douglass' performances were moulded by the encounter between the official, controlled spaces of abolitionist activism and the contested zones of unofficial carnival culture. These encounters, which occurred largely in the early period of Douglass' public life, illustrate the degree to which he used the connected strategies of dialogue and carnival as counterfoils to the ideological and representative control exerted by the abolitionist movement. (Bakhtin)

Ireland provides a useful focal point for consideration of the encounters and exchanges that characterize Douglass' his place in black Atlantic discourse. Irish Americans, whose initial racial ambiguity, and eventual absorption to the US working class involved their adoption of the racial signifiers of whiteness, have become a test case of United States racial identification, and illustrate, as do Douglass' own travels, the transformative power of geo-cultural shifts on individual and group identity. (Ignatiev; Allen) Conversely, the concurrent popular support for abolition in Ireland, where, in the context of ongoing anti-colonial and agrarian violence, the plight of American slaves was made analogous to that of the Irish peasantry, illustrates the complexity of the relationships between power, race and the popular imagination, and between different social and national sectors in the transatlantic arena. Like the many black speakers on the abolitionist circuit who crossed lines of race and class as well as national frontiers during the course of their transatlantic tours, Irish migrants engaged in a re-negotiation of the defining terms of cultural identity at this time. Both groups share the common experience of occupying multiple locations at once. Given the transnational dynamic of identity politics then, we might usefully read Douglass' work during the period of his transatlantic visit as occupying the interface of (at least) two cultural formations: that of US racial and class politics and the British-Irish colonial relation, each in some way entangled in the identity politics of the varied communities to which his texts and speeches are addressed.

This interface was also occupied by populist forms of racialized entertainment and political protest, particularly after the emergence of blackface minstrelsy as a major form of class and cultural expression. In his discussion of minstrelsy in the US, Eric Lott contends that "[i]t was in rowdy theatrical spaces that an emergent racial politics was both registered and created, and that the racial feeling underlying and shaping but many times eluding the official narratives of race... began to appear." (Lott 63) Blackface minstrelsy had, from the time of its inception in the 1830s, massive popular appeal, becoming "an instant rage and a national institution virtually overnight." (Toll 21) Although complicit in an appropriation and exploitation of black plantation culture by whites, and in modes of class reconfiguration which often incorporated a strongly racist ideology, minstrelsy, as Lott suggests, also marks the "public emergence of slave culture... or pointed political protest." (Lott 17) This protest in minstrelsy was often directed against the slave population it purported to represent, but it also denoted the emergence of inter-racial representations of black popular or folk culture on the US stage. Minstrelsy introduced African American dialect, music and dance to an extended public long after the textual representation of slave culture had surfaced in African American slave narratives and in the poetry of Phillis Wheatley. As a non-literary form, minstrelsy was accessible to a non-literate as well as reading public.⁴

Douglass, predictably, was strongly opposed to blackface minstrelsy. Writing in the *North Star* on 27 October, 1848, he described blackface imitators as "the filthy scum of white society, who have stolen from us a complexion denied to them by nature, in which to make money, and pander to the corrupt tastes of their white fellow citizens." (Foner 1: 547) Given the negative light in which African Americans were usually portrayed in blackface entertainment, Douglass' reaction to the minstrel show is understandable. Yet his remarks also provide an inkling of the class dynamic at work in his rhetoric, for minstrelsy is defined as a mode of white rather than black cultural expression and identified with moral corruption. Quickly adapting the conventions of racialized language to disavow the popular form any cultural authenticity, Douglass' denunciation parodies the conventions of Victorian moral

colour-coding as the representative fiction of class identity. Such coding drew on the domestic cults of cleanliness and contagion, associating blackness with occupational dirt and grime as a means of racializing many in the working class. (McCintock) In a curious manipulation of the class-race model, Douglass' remark sees him squarely denouncing minstrelsy as symptom and symbol of the moral corruption of lower class whites. His characterization of minstrelsy as a debased or blackened form of white popular culture then, gestures towards another paradigm in which the positions of high and low culture are complicated by a form of racial overdetermination not necessarily conforming to typical configurations of the white-black polarity.

On a personal as well as racial level, Douglass had good reason to feel the affront of this contradictory form of racial politics. One of the stock characters of the minstrel stage, Zip Coon, whose other manifestations included Dandy Jim and Count Julius Caesar Mars Napoleon Sinclair Brown, portrayed a black urban dandy, "whose vanity, stupidity and sheer ludicrousness neatly reinforced what whites wanted to believe about Northern blacks," (Toll 68-9) as well as promoting a unifying sense of working-class identity by producing a discreditable representation of the upper and leisured classes. Douglass was himself literate, articulate and increasingly socially mobile, and such portrayals must have cut rather close to the bone. As an anti-slavery speaker he had suffered the prejudice against any aspiration to cross class boundaries endemic to these Zip Coon representations, as well as occasional fear of African American intellectualism.⁵ Exhorted by abolitionists in the early days of his public speaking to "[g]ive us the facts... we will take care of the philosophy," it was even suggested that Douglass adopt the plantation dialect of the Southern "darkie" in order to present a more authentic portrayal of African American identity and to add verisimilitude to his description of bondage. (Gates 1993, 49-50)⁶ "People won't believe you ever was a slave, Frederick," advised Friend George Foster, while John A. Collins remarked that Douglass had "[b]etter have a *little* of the plantation manner of speech than not; 'tis not best that you seem too learned," he concluded." (Douglass 367) Collins may well have been concerned more with the continuing credibility of the abolitionist movement than with keeping Douglass in his place;⁷ yet there is also a degree to which what was legitimate and credible in the rendition of the slave experience was being influenced by the more general cultural climate of blackface representation.

Another staple of the minstrel show was the stump speech, a distinctive feature of the olio, the second or variety section of the show's programme. (Toll 55; Lott 5) In the antebellum period, abolitionists were by far the favourite target of minstrel stump speeches, though issues such as temperance and women's rights also came under attack. (Toll 56) Overblown, blackface parodies of abolitionist rhetoric, ridiculing not just African Americans but their claims for political and social justice must have taken on an added irony for Douglass, one of the few black anti-slavery speakers on an abolitionist circuit dominated by the white middle class.

For Douglass, like the blackface parodists of the minstrel shows, was in the business of representing race, and did so far beyond the borders of the United States. From 1845-47 he toured Britain and Ireland, vigorously campaigning against the United States' "peculiar institution." His visit coincided with that of the US minstrel troupe The Ethiopian Serenaders to Britain, a coincidence which Sarah Meer argues provided Douglass with a "competing representation" of African American cultural authenticity. (Meer 141-65) Authenticity was very much to the fore in the scramble for representational control of class and racial identifications, with many minstrel shows claiming to be "original" or "true" "Ethiopians." Yet even when the minstrels behind the blackface were African Americans, Douglass still saw fit to protest. In a review of Gavitt's Original Ethiopian Serenaders, one of the few all-black troupes operating in the 1840s, Douglass claimed that "[t]heir singing was but a poor imitation of white performers, and not even a tolerable representation of the character of

colored people," going on to urge the troupe to "represent the colored man as he is, than as Ethiopian Minstrels usually represent him to be... [to] rely more on the refinement of the public, than its vulgarity, let them strive to conform to it rather than to cater to the lower elements of the baser sort, and they may do much to elevate themselves and their race in popular estimation." (Foner 5: 141-2) Because they imitate white cultural practice rather than relying on "authentic" blackness, the Serenaders, according to Douglass, cannot hope to achieve representational legitimacy. A potentially elevating black culture is therefore seen as sullied by its association with working class whites – whose operative mode is blackface – with African Americans in blackface seen as masked, debased and indeed implicated in white hegemonic distortions of black cultural practice.

Douglass was acutely aware of his own role in staging race on the anti-slavery platform. Commenting on his life's work at the end of the Civil War, he recalled that "I felt I had reached the end of the noblest and best part of my life... The anti-slavery platform had performed its work and my voice was no longer needed. 'Othello's occupation was gone.'" (Douglass 811) John Earnest concludes that "there is a certain cultural inevitability in Douglass' identification with Othello," (Earnest 170) an identification that characterizes him as a lone, black actor striving for representational authority on the historical and racial stage. It also indicates the degree to which Douglass felt the need to counteract the populist image of the platform with nobler, more élitist associations with mainstream theatre, a space increasingly sentimentalized as the century progressed. Indeed, Douglass' identification with Othello begs an analogy with the African American tragedian Ira Aldridge, known as the "African Roscius," who enjoyed considerable popularity throughout the then United Kingdom, particularly in Ireland, where he performed frequently in the years from 1829 onwards. Aldridge first visited Belfast in 1829 and Dublin in 1831. (*Dublin University Magazine* 1870, 460) Although famed for his representations of Othello, Aldridge's stage performances also incorporated more politicized sketches, such as "Liberty and Equality, or The American Slave Market" and minstrel songs such as "Jump Jim Crow," "Lucy Long" and the popular favourite, "Opossum up a Gum Tree." (Marshall, Stock 150-1) The diversity of Aldridge's performances illustrates the degree of cross-fertilization that occurred between established and popular stage forms of the period. And, although Paul Robeson, an actor later famed for his portrayals of Othello, was to say of minstrelsy that "[i]n a popular form, Negro music, launched by white men – not Negroes – has swept the world!" (Robeson 92) in Aldridge's case, minstrelsy only added to his appeal and race to his performative glamour. As an African American he could capitalize on the popular appeal of minstrel songs and may even, Rehin suggests, have set the British (and Irish) stage for minstrelsy, although this connection was not made at the time. (Rehin 647)

Given the overlap in popular and polite form then, and the necessity for a broad popular appeal, it is unsurprising that there were many similarities in the staging of minstrel shows and abolitionist meetings. (Fisch 21)⁸ The latter often included music, songs, mimicry and other crowd-pleasers, with audiences frequently drawn as much by the promise of an interesting spectacle as by any moral conviction. Richard Blackett makes the point that visiting African American abolitionists may even have played an "unwitting role in perpetuating African American minstrelsy's depiction of the Negro," (Blackett 187-206) a depiction decried by Douglass as a "contemptuous sneer... originating in the spirit of slavery." (*FDP* 3: 335-6) Be that as it may, the Victorian stage was a hotbed of representational licentiousness with several other groups suffering the brunt of the perverse dynamics of representation, contestation and social control. Concurrent depictions of "blackness," "Irishness," colonial "otherness" and female sexuality emerged in this period as icons of the expanding political cultural sphere of popular entertainment.

Minstrel shows also travelled to Ireland with some fifteen minstrel shows appearing in Dublin before the US Civil War. (Riach 231) A programme from the Virginia Minstrels show

in Dublin in 1844, one year before Douglass' visit, promises the audience views of the "sports and pastimes of the Virginia Colored Race, through medium of Songs, Refrains, and Ditties as sung by Southern slaves." (Toll 34) The form even generated some early native imitators. At a speech given in Limerick on 10 November, 1845, Douglass publicly rebuked a local actor named Bateman who performed "Jim Crow... apes of the negro" in city playhouses. (*FDP* 1:1, 77) The editor of a local newspaper, the *Limerick Reporter*, defended Bateman, considering him a "clever actor whose representation of a particular negro character, debased by his white despot is no more to be considered as a description of negroes generally than the representation of... any of the Irish buffoons represented by LEONARD or Miss Heron be viewed as types of Irish character." (*Limerick Reporter*, November 11, 1845) Not only does this report suggest that Bateman's portrayal reproduced the racial burlesque of its American predecessors, it points to the proliferation of diverse forms of racial and sexual burlesque in the popular stereotypes of the period.

But it also indicates that the understanding of the minstrel, tavern or music hall audience was not as uniformly unsympathetic to the subjects of these representations as is sometimes suggested. This was particularly true outside the United States where there was no social or political need for a derogatory minstrel image of African Americans. (Rehin 687; Fisch 25-37) Nor were the boundaries of the spheres of politics and popular entertainment clearly defined. In Irish nationalist politics for example, minstrelsy had the potential to manipulate the high profile of American slavery in Britain by parodying the moral prestige enjoyed by abolitionism among the middle and upper classes. An illustration of this is provided by a bizarre incident that occurred on 2 October, 1843, at a meeting of the Loyal National Repeal Association in Dublin. According to the Repeal press, after the meeting had adjourned a "Negro stepped on the Speaker's platform" and made the following little speech: "I am vera glad to see Massa Dan O'Connell, for he save the life of black people (cheers and laughter). I hear of him when no bigger than that (placing hand within a foot of the surface of the table), and though I was brought up a Protestant, I am now a Catholic, and will die in that religion for the sake of Massa Dan O'Connell (loud laughter in which the Liberator heartily joined followed this burst of eloquence.)" (*Pilot*, 4 October, 1843)⁹

In this instance, the potential of blackface as a tactic of class censure is retained. Aside from the dubious taste of the subject matter, the irony of presenting O'Connell – a large landowner and member of the ascendancy – as the dominant partner in an evoked slave-master relation is dangerously close to criticism of the emerging class of Loyal nationalists in Ireland. For this instance of racial masking is used to facilitate the contravention of another ethnic signifier, the religious divide that had formed the legal basis of British discriminatory practices in Ireland, and was the defining component of British (anti-Catholic) and later Irish bourgeois (Catholic) nationalism. The "Negro" who "converts" from Protestantism to Catholicism in gratitude to "Massa Dan O'Connell" suggests, in this relatively minor performance, an ambivalence in the relationship between the Repeal movement and its populist power base, an ambivalence that finds expression in its portrayal of the subaltern population as subject to continuing servitude in a reformed colonial, which is to say bourgeois nationalist, context.

Significantly, this incident occurred in a country with neither an Africanist population nor the modern industrial base that gave minstrelsy in the United States its particular class-racial dynamic. (Sexton 166)¹⁰ Ireland was, however, experiencing considerable unrest as the modernising ambitions of the imperial power and nationalist movement came face to face with the non-modern populations of the rural base. Adopting and articulating blackface – an effect that foregrounds the bond with an atavistic folk culture – in this context therefore, has a rather different import to that of the minstrel show in the United States, for this particular blackface imitation maintains a metonymic alliance with the subjection of the slave that exceeds the immediate context of the discourse of nationalism.

There were further radicalizations of African American impersonation in Ireland at this time that pointed to the mutual experience of oppression. These disturbances of current hegemonic understandings of cultural, racial and historical difference can be read as an attempt to counter what Homi Bhabha calls "the narcissistic demands of colonial authority." (Bhabha 88) Imitative practice, when not directed towards reproducing images of power, underpinning difference, or establishing power differentials between non-élite social strata, served to undermine, displace, or at least complicate the templates of colonial or bourgeois social aspiration. In Ireland, metonymic alliances of this kind undermined the prestigious image of élite reformism in two ways. Firstly, they conflated slavery with class-complicated forms of colonial subjectivity, negating the moral comfort of those adopting the abolitionist position. Secondly, the subaltern population demonstrated a sophisticated understanding of transatlantic issues, actively confirming themselves, despite being more or less excluded from the abolitionist loop, as agents of anti-colonialism and anti-slavery. Popular pairings of the plight of the American slave and that of the disenfranchised and oppressed in Ireland were commonplace, as Irish peasants seeking land reform and political rights drew direct comparisons between themselves and those enslaved in the Americas, exploiting the symbolic and increasingly political potential of the slavery issue in Britain. (Lloyd 23)¹¹ And in the early 1840s, controversy raged in Ireland regarding the forced emigration of some of the Irish poor to the West Indies, specifically Jamaica, to replace slave labour lost to planters with emancipation in 1833. Fears of enslavement on arrival in Jamaica had the effect of raising the ideological stakes and further enforcing the analogy with slavery in the popular imagination.¹² This is not to equate slavery with colonial oppression, but rather to suggest the existence of an interface between marginal elements in the emergent west formed by and through interactive and imitative strategies of resistance and reform.

This, then, was the milieu in which Douglass operated during the course of his transatlantic tour. His rhetoric from this period shows him to have been aware of the potency of racial imagery, counterfeit and burlesque both in crossing class lines and articulating categories of dissent outside the sphere of abolitionist ideology. It was a symbolism that he actively employed. At a speech given in Ayr, Scotland on 24 March, 1846, Douglass codified his social rise since escaping from slavery by indicating his distance from the debased and blackened forms of labour he – then a skilled craftsman trained as a ship's caulker – was forced to undertake in his early days in the North. "After my escape," he explained, "I arrived at New Bedford, where I was engaged rolling oil casks on the quay, and doing anything that presented itself; yes, ladies and gentlemen, you must know that the individual who now addresses you even occupied at that time the *elevated* position of a chimney sweep." (*FDP* 1:2, 31, 35) In his "Farewell Speech to the British People" of 1847, Douglass exhorted abolitionist crowds to "adopt the motto of Pat," the popular, archetypal Irishman of the Victorian stage and *Punch* magazine, as a "principle of action." In a manner reminiscent of the representational authority assumed by minstrel performers over black subjects, Douglass was claiming jurisdiction over the symbolic parameters of Irishness in Britain.¹³ "Pat," according to Douglass, "upon entering a Tipperary row[,] [s]aid he, 'Wherever you see a head, hit it!' [Loud cheers and laughter.]" (*FDP* 1:2, 31, 35) Pat and Mike routines involved a cross-talk act in dialect, punctuated by bouts of violence and predicated on the supposition that the characters portrayed were both stupid and drunk. Irish acts, like minstrel shows, created for their respective audiences a permissive realm in which many social norms could be simultaneously violated and contained. By slipping into Irish dialect, therefore, Douglass crosses into a realm of Irishness, where, according to the representational stereotype, behaviour such as drunkenness and violence is normalized. Despite the self-evidently negative connotations of the stereotype, however, particularly in an age bent on redeeming the working classes from the evils and excesses of alcoholic consumption, this portrayal also underlines the liberational potential of mimicry. For Douglass' representation of the Irish is

one sanctioned by the imperial power, Britain, even as it acknowledges a population that is resistant to the empire's regulatory stamp.

This particular instance in which Douglass stages an incursion into the dialect space of Irishness underlines the importance of his use of linguistic masking as a mode of resistance. The creation of a dialect space – an effect that appears frequently in Douglass' work – frees the speaker from the strictures of the social and institutional space in which he is performing. In doing so, it allows for the articulation of categories of resistance which transgress the civilized abolitionist doctrines of non-violence and moral suasion, providing the moral legitimation underpinning Douglass' address – "Wherever you see a head, hit it!" (*FDP* 1:2, 31) Richard Bradbury has argued that, throughout his career, Douglass vacillated "between supporting moral force and physical force," concluding that, "his work as a whole can be seen as an expression of the contradictions and tension of the reformer seeking to reform existing structures while attempting to remain within [their]... conservative logic." (Bradbury 173) In a letter to Francis Jackson from Scotland dated 29 January, 1846, Douglass confessed that "[m]y Soul sickens at the thought, yet I see in myself all those elements of character which were I to yield to their promptings might lead me to deeds as bloody as those at which my soul now sickens and from which I now turn with disgust and shame. Thank God liberty is no longer to be contended for and gained by instruments of death." (Boston Anti-Slavery Collection 13) Evidently Douglass was at this time drawn to, though never overtly advocated, the recourse to physical as well as moral force as a means to end slavery, an issue then dividing the transatlantic abolitionist movement. In his adoption of the dialect space of Irishness, Douglass can suggest alternative strategies to the moral suasion advocated by the Garrisonian abolitionists without directly challenging their official, non-violent stance. Mimicry of another kind of other allows Douglass momentarily to exceed the authority of the abolitionist frame in which he is speaking; by assuming the identity of an undisciplined, external subject, who is both an unassimilated colonial other and a figure of public ridicule, he can disrupt that moral authority while still maintaining the appearance of complete adherence.

Somewhat paradoxically, this strategy also allows Douglass to confirm his sameness to the British crowd. Taking advantage of an anomaly in British imperialist discourse – which characterised the Irish as racially inferior if not literally black – Douglass' uses his parody of Irishness to illustrate, in racial and class terms, his distance from a recognisable, and recognisably different, racial other. In this sense his rhetoric can be seen to participate in the production of race, but in ways which evidently cannot be understood solely as counter-responses to the racial paradigms of the United States and the slave-master relation which engendered them.

The dominant use of dialect spaces during Douglass' British and Irish visit, however, appears in his famous imitations of a Southern slaveholding preacher providing a lesson on obedience to an imagined audience of servants. This imitation was a great favourite of Douglass' early transatlantic tour, operating as a performative intervention in, or engagement with, the multiple representational strata constituting the uneven fields of class and racial formation, and resistance, in the nineteenth century. As the examples of his self-configuration within the class and colonialist structure of his host society, Britain, and within the parameters of official abolitionist doctrine illustrate, Douglass often played on modes of differentiation that took the form of racialization and excess. In the preacher sketch, Douglass occupies, through dialect, a range of subject positions that cross and re-cross the line of racial difference – hereditary bondage – instituted and upheld by the legal apparatus of the United States. The lesson revolves around the errancy of Sambo, a plantation slave caught napping on the job by his master, who then whips Sambo so severely that he cannot work for a week. Sambo, the loyal, trusting black servant in the play *The Patriot*, had made his singing debut on the minstrel stage in a comic role in 1834, when he danced about and sang, "Weel about – turn about – do just so, and eb'ry time weel about, Jump Sambo." (Toll 28; Moody 68-9) In

Douglass' account, Sambo reappears in and between narratives and counter-narratives of social formation. Douglass presents Sambo as an *ingenu*, a foil to both the bombast of the slaveholder, and the worldliness and intellectual sophistication of Douglass himself. At the beginning of the performance, puffing out his chest and adopting the "exaggerated attitude and drawling manner so characteristic of the American preachers, amid the laughter of all present," Douglass – articulating whiteface – asks: "You servants, To what was this whipping traceable[?] [T]o disobedience, and if you would not be whipped, and if you would bask in the sunshine of your master's favor, let me exhort you to obedience. You should also be grateful that God in his mercy brought you from Africa to this Christian land." (*FDP* 1:1, 43)

Marking the limits of elite moral and social apologetics, the preacher's remarks – or rather Douglass' ventriloquizing of them – invoke the developmental narrative of enlightenment progress as rationale for the social and political status quo. The dialect space of apologetics is, however, also overlaid on the work of one of Douglass' precursors, Phillis Wheatley, whose 1772 poem, "On Being Brought from Africa to America," carries the opening line, "'Twas mercy brought me from my Pagan land." (Wheatley 171) Douglass may possibly be identifying an unwonted irony in Wheatley's voice, but he is also signifying on the mutually entangled rhetorical roots of slavery and anti-slavery, which provide a common origin for much Afro- and Anglo-American literary production. Douglass' revision of Wheatley's construction of America as the site of her salvation, and slavery as the vehicle of its achievement, implicates Wheatley in the articulation of whiteface representations of the slave-subject, represented in Douglass' sermon by the preacher himself. Paradoxically, embedded in Douglass' parody of bourgeois rationalism, which incorporates African American as well as slaveholding accents, is the naïve, populist voice of Sambo, upholding the slaveholder's view: "Me hear a good sermon today, de Minister make eb'ry thing so clear, white man above a Nigger any day." (*FDP* 1:1, 43) Sambo's inclusion underlines the shift in the narrative axis of the performance towards the realm of the popular. Conversely, his borrowing from the minstrel stage allows Sambo to be understood as an ironic articulation of blackface in this debate – an imitation of an imitation – serving to distance Douglass, the authentic representative of blackness, from the ventriloquized counterfeit. As a symbol of arrested development rather than civilised progress, Sambo is presented as linguistically and intellectually stunted by the experience and institution of slavery, which replaces the Christianity of Wheatley's account as the promise of the Middle Passage. Sambo's naiveté, coupled with Douglass' incursion into the dialect space of white supremacy, simultaneously reproduces and undermines the discursive dominance of elite whiteface and populist blackface representations of the slave-subject. By querying the cultural legitimacy of these representations in his own performances, Douglass' use of dialect spaces produces a conjunction in the views of both master and slave, an accord that is constitutively contradictory. For the logic of the pro-slavery argument is brought to a conceptual impasse by this performative critique of rational reasoning and monologic discourse, which simultaneously questions the role of the slave-subject in the production of a non-imitative image of the African American iterative self.

Hence, by reinventing the minstrel stage as a site for understanding and deconstructing the rhetoric of enslavement, Douglass can manipulate white working-class forms of culture and practice and revise the work of his African American precursors without falling prey to either elite or populist representative hegemonies. Douglass' appropriation of the carnivalesque production of blackness endemic to the minstrel stage – i.e., the voice of Sambo – indicates, despite his protestations, the ongoing potential of blackface imitation as a mode of political dialogue. For his articulation of blackface and whiteface together creates a third space of representation that marks the interface between models of class-based cultural forms and their racial paradigms. The articulation of black- and whiteface subject positions within the same

speech-frame initiates a dialogue of opposites, mediated through the multiple personae and, indeed, the intra-lingualism of Douglass' rhetorical production.

Houston Baker has remarked on Douglass' preference for standard English over the black vernacular, but in the early phase of Douglass' public career he often staged himself through performative flirtations with the vernacular form. (Baker 3) It is notable that this flirtation occurred at a time when Douglass was still beholden to the abolitionists, who prized him above all else for his persuasive and rational eloquence – an eloquence measurable by its distance from black plantation vernacular. Speaking of the relationship between Douglass' written and rhetorical voice and abolitionist attitudes to them, Henry Louis Gates, Jr. notes that "Douglass' oral testimony... authenticated his *Narrative*... It was this spoken and written 'voice' that abolitionists wanted to exploit, as the audible and visible signs of *reason*, to connect the members of the slave community to the whole of the human family." (Gates 1987, 88-117) Douglass' early non-literary voice, however, shows a particular interest in vernacular forms and non-modern strategies more normally associated with subaltern or non-rational modes. In his early career at least, the textual Douglass often seems very much at odds with his performative counterpart. Indeed, though complicated by the class dynamics of his own social rise, Douglass' evasion of the prohibitions of official language achieved through adopting the medium of a popular form he claimed to despise, and concurrent critique of the distortions of social reality endemic to racialist representation and official truths, allow many of his speeches from this period to be viewed as folkloric presentations of slave culture in dialogue with the official discourses of pro-slavery and abolition camps and the unofficial, carnivalesque white culture of blackface minstrelsy.

The tendency on the part of abolitionists and indeed of later critics to lionise Douglass' staging of a rational, enlightenment, textual self at the expense of attention to non-literary, carnivalesque elements of his rhetoric, in particular his manipulation of vernacular forms, might be compared with the mixed reception given to Paul Lawrence Dunbar's work. Like Douglass', Dunbar's work falls into two linguistic categories: his dialect work, which includes some experimentation with Irish American, German American and regional as well as African American vernaculars; and his work in standard English. The sentimentalism of some of Dunbar's dialect work has led to his placement within the minstrel tradition, with the result that his work is sometimes considered representative of inauthentic blackness.

But Dunbar was clearly conscious of the representative sway held by blackface minstrelsy by late century and demonstrated his capacity to harness and expand the metaphoric import of the form's representative trope, namely that of the blackface mask, in both streams of his poetry. In *The Book of American Negro Poetry* of 1931, James W. Johnson was to claim that "in... [Dunbar's] books the two channels through which black poetry emerged in America – the literary and oral traditions – begin to come together." (Johnson 35-6) Yet the double voice of Dunbar's poetry, what Gates has called "mask in motion," (Gates 1987, 88-117) finds a precedent in Douglass' early oratory, particularly in his engagement with class-based forms of racialised rhetoric and struggle with representative authenticity. Indeed, Dunbar's 1895 poem, "An Ante-Bellum Sermon," is a striking revision of Douglass' use of the same theme, though Dunbar's piece posits itself in different dialogic relation to the black folk and (largely white) reading public than does Douglass' multi-voiced performance. Ironically, while Douglass owed much of his political success to his proficiency in standard English, exemplary in his oratory and writing of "the highest intellectual culture," (Gates 1993, 61) Dunbar claimed that "I've got to write dialect poetry, it's the only way I can get them to listen to me." (Bruce 94) Clearly, Dunbar's use of the African American vernacular was influenced by pressure from the politico-cultural marketplace. Similar pressures were brought to bear on Douglass in his early years as an abolitionist agent, as he took part in the closely fought battle for discursive superiority in the public sphere. Indeed, the ongoing necessity for dialogue between official, folkloric and popular forms generates a persisting over-determination in Douglass' early

rhetoric, with concurrent appeals across a range of socio-political positions. Douglass' "slaveholder's sermon" in particular remains over-determined in this respect, with its corresponding critique of slavery and the plight of industrial wage workers in Britain and the United States. Conscious of their economic oppression, workers adopted the vocabulary of slavery as a means to indict their exploiters, describing themselves as "wage" or "white slaves." In Douglass' imitation, labour discipline is linked to salvation, as he urges slaves to "*labor diligently* to make your calling and election sure... Servants, be obedient unto your masters. Look at your hard, horny hands, your strong muscular frames, and see how mercifully he has adapted you to the duties you are to fulfill... while to your masters, who have slender frames and long delicate fingers, he has given brilliant intellects, that they may do the *thinking*, while you do the *working*." (FDP 1:1, 17, emphasis original) Although directed at the racialized paradigms of social Darwinism which insisted on the fitness of the races for certain employments based on their alleged physical and mental characteristics, this rhetoric could as easily apply to class distinctions made on much the same lines. In fact, at a time when conditions for free workers were deteriorating in the cities, and labour was becoming increasingly entangled in the contradictions of republican language, symbolism and social reality, Douglass' speech appeals across the colour line by activating the class dynamics of popular struggle in Britain and in the industrial North of the United States.

Significantly, much of the contestatory rhetoric involving parody, dialogism and mimicry in Douglass' oratory corresponds to the years 1841-47, beginning with his initiation as an anti-slavery speaker in 1841 – he had escaped slavery in Maryland in 1838 – and ending with his return from Europe, a free man, in 1847. The latter years, 1845-47, involved a profound renegotiation of Douglass' relationship with the abolitionist movement and US state formations, a renegotiation staged in the shifting form of his literary work. His oratory also reveals the fluctuations between polite and popular forms, and appeals to hegemonic and non-modern modes, that this transition produced. Following Bakhtin's remarks on carnival, Alexander Sexton notes of minstrelsy that "blackface convention rendered permissible topics that were difficult to handle on the Victorian stage or in print." (Sexton 166) Although generally performing before the staunchly respectable – unquestionably polite if not exclusively elite audiences – on at least one occasion Douglass used the abolitionist platform in a way that transgressed the norms of genteel morality, by exploiting the slippage between black and blackface in the public sphere. In Limerick on 10 November, 1845, Douglass indulged his audience in the visceral spectacle of whips, manacles and leg-irons, conjuring up images of slave bodies made grotesque by their abuse at the hands of slaveholders. According to the *Limerick Reporter*, Douglass, towards the end of his speech,

proceeded to exhibit some of the implements used in torturing the slaves, among which was a collar taken from the neck of a young woman who had escaped from Mobile. It had so worn into her neck that her blood and flesh were found on it (sensation). After showing the fetters used in chaining the feet of two slaves together, he exhibited a pair of hand-cuffs taken from a fugitive slave who escaped from Maryland into Pennsylvania. He knew the man well. He was being brought in custody to his master by a constable – he saw a sharp rock before him, and with one mighty effort he raised his hands, and, striking the hand-cuffs against the stone, broke them, and at the same time his left wrist (sensation). He fled and was overtaken, but with the unbroken hand he drew a dirk from his breast, and cut down his pursuer (cries of "bravo")... Mr Douglas[s] then went on to exhibit a horrid whip which was made of cow hide, and whose lashes were as hard as horn. They were clotted with blood when he first got them. He saw his master tie up a young woman eighteen years of age, and beat her with that identical whip until the blood ran down her back... (cries of "horrible.") (FDP 1:1, 85-6)

Unquestionably, the carnivalesque elements of this display, notably the revealing details concerning the outrages perpetrated on slaves-women in particular, and the exhibition of the implements used to torture them, transgress the polite norms of public debate, gratuitously evoking the spectacle of the mutilated female body. Blassingame notes that the story which accompanies the "horrid whip," the last item displayed by Douglass, refers to the whipping of Douglass' disabled cousin, Hester, recounted in the *Narrative* and a subject of scandal even in its written form. (*FDP* 1:1, 85) In Limerick, the only recorded occasion on which Douglass produced these items for display,¹⁴ and the venue at which he made a strong declaration against blackface representations playing in parallel with his own appearances, narrative and performative carnivalesque mesh in the image of Hester's mutilation, in an exhibition owing more to the circus or fairground than the austerity and solemnity of the Independent Chapel, Bedford Row.

The period of Douglass' career in which the carnivalesque is prevalent predates the founding of the *North Star*, of which he became editor, and hence of a sustained, interactive relation with the written word and the reading public. It also marks a transitional period in Douglass' move from slavery to freedom. Escape to the North had turned Douglass from a slave into a criminal fugitive overnight. Speaking in 1844, Douglass described himself as "not a fugitive *from* slavery – but a fugitive *slave*. He was a fugitive, he said, not *from* slavery – but *in* slavery." (*FDP* 1:1, 24) The influence of the institution of slavery exceeded its literal geographical and legal reach, allowing Douglass to posit the existence of another subjective category that is neither enslaved nor free. Somewhere between bondage and freedom, the fugitive occupies a moral and representational space that cannot be defined by convenient binary oppositions. Escaped but not yet free, subject but no longer enslaved, Douglass acquires an alternative identity that cannot be contained by the victim-enlightened individual dichotomy allowed by abolitionist convention. This fugitive identity compliments the dialogic mode of much of Douglass' oratory at this time, which negotiates between structures of oppression and appeal. The "Farewell to the British People," delivered as Douglass was about to embark for the United States, a free man, in 1847, was the culmination of a period of rhetorical, literary and personal transition, at the beginning of which Alan Rice, writing of the *Cambria* incident notes, "the racial world was turned upside down." (Rice, Crawford 3) Publication of the "Farewell" in pamphlet form in London in 1847 marked the end of Douglass' improvisational engagement with carnival and his entry to more mainstream, textualized approaches to political debate.¹⁵ But Douglass' representational rhetoric from the early period of his public life breaks down the formalities of a linguistic hierarchy based on ideological conformity to western liberal opinion, and initiates a dynamic of play with often competing discourses of racial and class identity. Such play creates categories of representation undergoing constant redefinition in changing structures of social control, and opening up avenues into contested zones of the politics of agency.

Endnotes

¹ Valerie Smith is referring specifically to the moment in Douglass' *Narrative* at which "the white man's power to enslave the black man," i.e., the power of the white man over the written word and its interpretation, was revealed.

² Jenny Sharpe remarks on the incident of the magical root which occurs at the same time as Douglass' confrontation with the slave-breaker, Covey, that "[t]he episode is... present in the text as the marker of a resistance to slavery that did not originate in the anti-slavery movement." (Sharpe 34-5)

³ According to Henry Louis Gates, Jr., for example, Douglass "seems to have given priority to the spoken word over the written word," concluding that Douglass is

"Representative Man because he was Rhetorical Man," in the tradition of the Western discourse of the developmental masculine self. (Gates 1987, 106-8)

⁴ George F. Rehin points to one of the paradoxes of minstrelsy, which allowed for cultural interchange in both directions across the colour line in the United States. Speaking of the mutability of the form he remarks that "minstrelsy also contributed to the development of a distinctive Afro-American style as well, when many professional entertainers among the caricatured race embraced the form after the Civil War." (Rehin 686)

⁵ Douglass enjoyed a significant degree of social mobility throughout his life. Apprenticed as a ships' caulker while still a slave, he was forced off dockyards by white workers when he escaped North and could only earn a living doing menial work. Despite this economic origin however, Douglass had, by the time he died, amassed considerable personal wealth and served as US Marshall to Washington DC and US Ambassador to Haiti. (Douglass 67)

⁶ A controversy surrounding the authenticity of a black abolitionist arose in 1841, when James Williams, claiming to be a fugitive slave, dictated a slave narrative then published by the abolitionist movement. Williams' story was subsequently revealed to be a fabrication and the movement was discredited. (Gates 1993, 47-65)

⁷ Douglass chose to vilify this attitude as racist, (and indeed created a specific dialect space for his presentation of Quaker-voice,) as may well have been the case. However, as noted, the abolitionist movement had recently been embarrassed by its faith in Williams, which had undermined the credibility of both abolitionism and subsequent slave-narrators, whose credentials were more thoroughly investigated.

⁸ Audrey A. Fisch points out that "the British penchant for the 'genuine' black extended beyond the street and music hall to 'respectable' anti-slavery gatherings. The attraction of rubbing shoulders with the black American abolitionists made black speakers 'essential' at British antislavery gatherings." (Fisch 21)

⁹ O'Connell was noted for his espousal of the rights of the slave and had made anti-slavery headlines in 1842 when he sent back money collected in the United States in support of the Repeal movement because it came with the proviso that he abandon his anti-slavery stance.

¹⁰ Speaking of the minstrel shows relationship with mass urban culture, Alexander Sexton notes that "what made the first minstrel show a "glad" surprise was that it provided a window into the complex culture developing in the new cities." (Sexton 166)

¹¹ Speaking of Marxism and feminism, Lloyd remarks on the "continuing dynamic by which nationalism is formed in articulation or conjuncture with other social movements," a position which could usefully be expanded in this context to include transnational movements such as anti-slavery, and vice-versa. (Lloyd 23)

¹² Many of the ships carrying these indentured servants sailed from the West Clare ports of Kilrush and Kilkee. A letter in the *Limerick Reporter* of January 12, 1841 states that "[t]his forced detention is an undoubted violation of the liberty of the subject, and is virtually and early announcement of the system of slavery that is likely to await the unfortunate emigrants." While slavery had been abolished, the system of indentured labour that replaced it bore great similarity to the previous institution. This was exasperated by the fact that few would live to complete their contracts and repay their debt of passage. There was also a precedent for Irish enslavement in the West Indies in the Cromwellian deportations in the mid-seventeenth century. The tone of the debate regarding the "Jamaica Emigration Scheme" shows that there was certainly popular belief in the British intention to enslave those participating, willingly or otherwise. For competing contemporary accounts of this emigration see *The Limerick Chronicle* (an establishment broadsheet) and *Limerick Reporter* (whiggish newspaper broadly aligned with Repeal) 1840-43.

¹³ This provides an interesting parallel to the situation that obtained in the US where, as Dale Cockrell remarks of the early minstrel stage that: "more and more... 'Others' represented

'Others,' that representation itself bec[ame] politicised... The Irish, who occupied a 'low Other' social niche with black Americans, claimed triumph over blacks in issues of power and control—representation!—on the stage and in the streets." (Cockrell 199n43)

¹⁴ On many other occasions however, Douglass referred to beatings and brutality, even going so far as to claim that he carried the scars of whippings he received beneath his shirt, although he is never recorded as having displayed those scars in public.

¹⁵ The "preacher" parody, which was predominant in Douglass' early speaking career, was repeated again and again throughout his visit to Britain and Ireland, but appears to have fallen out of usage on his return to the US.

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